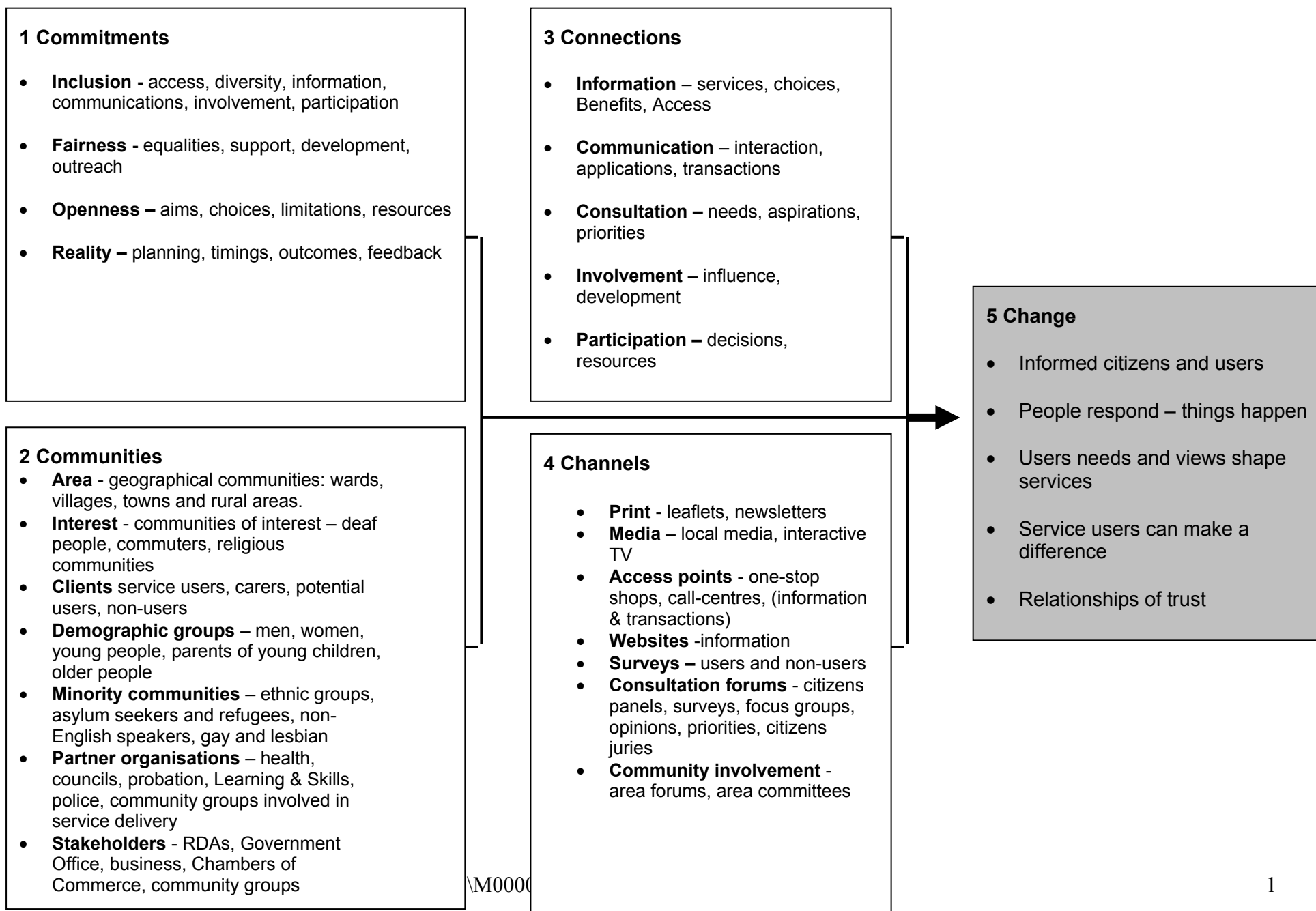


User Focus Planning Assessment Tool for Epping Forest District Council 2004/05



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Key question	Strengths	Weaknesses	Score	Comments
<p>Does the organisation demonstrate a visible commitment to ensuring that all its activities are designed to meet the needs and take account of the views of all types of service users and citizens?</p>	<p>Inclusion</p> <p>The council has adopted corporate customer charters, setting out the overall standards that customers can expect and how it will work to provide the best services for the district;</p> <p>The council's current consultation strategy was adopted in response to the introduction of best value legislation;</p> <p>The council undertakes general and service specific BVPI user satisfaction surveys every three years;</p> <p>A member group was set up 18 months ago to review customer consultation arrangements, and a result changes were made to the Council's approach, including the development of a corporate consultation register. A new member group has been tasked to further review the council's strategy and approach to public consultation during 2005/06, to ensure that the strategy includes corporate standards for future consultation;</p> <p>The council's corporate approach to customer services is being led by the development of proposals for a customer contact centre;</p> <p>The council is currently reviewing its existing Council Plan to consider the prioritisation of services based amongst other factors, on the socio-economic profile of the district;</p>	<p>Although the Council consults widely on issues, it is possible that minority groups such as travellers and others are not always represented. The authority has only a small ethnic minority population and is currently working to resolve the issue of inclusion through a review of its consultation strategy;</p> <p>The council presently has no lead officer or member champion for corporate customer service issues;</p> <p>The council can demonstrate many examples of service specific strengths to inform service level policy development, but is not always good at ensuring engagement in relation to corporate issues such as the development of its existing medium-term priorities;</p> <p>The Council introduced a process in relation to equality and diversity and tried to implement this within existing resources. However, these have proved insufficient and capacity has recently been increased by the engagement of expertise in order to move forward in this area;</p>	<p>3</p>	

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	<p>Chartermark and ISO9001 standards have been awarded to a range of service areas, which are based on principles of customer consultation;</p> <p>The council's 'Forester' magazine is published quarterly and distributed to every household and business in the district, and regularly seeks views on important issues for the district such as recycling, licensing and the East of England Plan;</p> <p>The Council complies with the statutory requirements for consultation in relation to planning applications and consults with near neighbours and other local councils. In addition to this, both the applicant and objectors are given the right to address the Plans Sub Committee when the application is considered;</p> <p>The Council's website is updated on a frequent basis and is often visited by the Community.</p> <p>Fairness</p> <p>Equality impact assessments are currently taking place across a range of service areas, and a number of the highest-priority assessments have been completed;</p> <p>The council participated voluntarily in the</p>			

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	<p>Commission for Racial Equality's recent national gypsy and traveller survey and scrutiny project;</p> <p>Overview and Scrutiny conduct a review of consultation exercises on an annual basis, to ensure that work is appropriately targeted and that duplication is avoided;</p> <p>Town Centre Enhancement Focus Groups consider the views of residents and businesses in terms of local area enhancement schemes;</p> <p>Openness</p> <p>Reports to the council's cabinet are required to list consultees on all actions and decisions, and to identify how respondents' views have been taken into account in proposing specific courses of action;</p> <p>Full consultation has been undertaken on recent reviews of the council's local plan and licensing policies;</p> <p>The council's complaints and compliments processes are monitored and regularly assessed by ethnicity;</p> <p>The council consulted extensively with its tenants in relation to options for the future management of its housing stock and agreed with tenants views that the stock should be</p>			

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	<p>retained in-house;</p> <p>Reality</p> <p>The council considers carefully the expectations of all consultees to a proposed course of action, accepting that these cannot always be met. This is a feature of the democratic process;</p> <p>Likewise, the council considers carefully the needs and requirements of all service users in the light of the often-competing priorities, and must allocate resources on a priority basis. This is also a feature of the democratic process;</p> <p>The council recognises that consultation sometimes reflects the view that services should not be changed and that users are satisfied with existing service levels, but that occasionally it may be necessary to change services to meet statutory requirements;</p> <p>There is a need to occasionally go against the views of consultees on issues where action proposed is directly in relation to a government target or initiative (e.g. the introduction of wheeled bins) and where contrary action would expose the council to risk;</p> <p>Feedback is given to residents on our statutory customer surveys via newspapers</p>			

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Key question	Strengths	Weaknesses	Score	Comments
	and the Forester.			
Does this commitment translate into actual processes which are used to ensure that the organisation understands its diverse community's needs and is ensuring that service delivery is designed on clear priorities which are based on need and aspirations of all sections of the community?	<p>Area</p> <p>The ongoing review of the Council Plan has identified areas where problems exist in relation to health, employment, deprivation etc. These issues will be considered further as the Council Plan develops;</p> <p>The role of ward members has developed since the introduction of executive decision-making arrangements to include a wider community advocacy function;</p> <p>Member/ward surgeries are held by the majority of the political groups represented on the council;</p>	<p>The council's consultation work is generally service specific and issue-led, and an overall corporate approach is not embedded across the authority;</p> <p>The council has attempted to address diversity and equality issues within existing resources. These have not proved sufficient and so additional resources are now being utilised;</p>	3	

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Key question	Strengths	Weaknesses	Score	Comments
	<p>Interest</p> <p>The 'Forester' magazine and other council documents and publications are available in formats such as large print, and on audio cassette;</p> <p>The council subscribes to the 'Talking Newspapers for the Blind' and 'Languageline' translation services and maintains a record of those members of its staff that are fluent in foreign languages, to assist with translation issues across council services;</p> <p>Clients</p> <p>Satisfaction levels are sought on an on-going basis in a number of service areas through questionnaires and satisfaction cards (Housing, Food Hygiene, Building Control etc), and through customer forums and user groups (Leisure, Housing, Access, North Weald Airfield etc);</p> <p>Consultation takes place with the Tenants Federation on Cabinet/Portfolio Holder reports affecting housing policy. The Federation is consulted annually on the contents of the HRA Business Plan;</p> <p>Many strengths within Housing Services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated Tenant Liaison Officer; 			

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Key question	Strengths	Weaknesses	Score	Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tenant and Leaseholders Federation; • Two-yearly open day; • 'Housing News' distributed to all tenants and housing waiting list applicants'; • Sheltered Housing Forum; • Annual ethnicity monitoring; • Support and funding for tenants associations; • District-wide Tenant Participation Agreement (TPA) and estate-based local TPAs; • Contribution to Essex-wide housing needs assessment for BME groups; • Housing needs assessment for travellers; <p>Non-user research in relation to the council's leisure facilities was conducted in March 2004, and the development of an action plan to improve use is contained within the authority's CPA Improvement Plan;</p> <p>Demographic Groups</p> <p>The council actively supports the local Youth Parliament and facilitates a citizenship programme and summer university activity courses for young people;</p> <p>The Council participates in a Joint Management Team for Older Peoples' Services, which works with the Better Government for Older People Organisation and is promoting older peoples' advisory groups.</p>			

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Key question	Strengths	Weaknesses	Score	Comments
	<p>Minority Communities</p> <p>The council has a very small ethnic minority population;</p> <p>Ethnicity monitoring is carried out across a number of services, such as Housing and Human Resources.</p> <p>Partner Organisations</p> <p>The council undertakes the three-yearly general BVPI user satisfaction surveys in partnership with other Essex local authorities;</p> <p>The Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership work with partners and local people to resolve issues;</p> <p>A Supporting People strategy workshop is held with partner agencies;</p> <p>Stakeholders</p> <p>The implementation of race and general equality issues is promoted by the council's Race Equality Scheme, which also considers issues of gender and disability;</p> <p>A multi-agency Hate Incident Panel monitors hate incidents relating to minority ethnic communities</p>			

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	<p>Community Strategy events are held by the Local Strategic Partnership to promote engagement and connection with the aspirations of the Community Strategy;</p> <p>A jointly funded Town Centre Manager post has been established to enable liaison and consultation with business and traders etc in relation to issues such as parking reviews and local town centre enhancement issues including town centre enhancement schemes;</p>			
<p>Is the organisation clear on what is trying to achieve by connecting and engaging with different types of users/patients and citizens and is it clear how the information generated by this engagement will feed into policy formulation?</p>	<p>Information</p> <p>The Council seeks to engage the community in the services it provides in order to better understand its needs and aspirations. This adds to members' local knowledge collected via their representative ward member role.</p> <p>The council produces a wide range of information on its services, through means such as leaflets, the website, information displays, and local media and 'Forester' magazine articles;</p> <p>Communication</p> <p>All residents and businesses in the district receive the 'Forester' magazine on a quarterly basis;</p>	<p>The council's consultation work is generally service specific and issue-led, and an overall corporate approach is not embedded across the authority;</p> <p>Consultation is not always used pro-actively to inform policy development;</p> <p>The council is clear on what it is trying to achieve on specific issues, but is not always good at consulting citizen's on 'big picture' issues;</p>	<p>2</p>	

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Key question	Strengths	Weaknesses	Score	Comments
	<p>A quarterly 'Housing News' newsletter is published and sent to each of the council's housing tenants;</p> <p>Consultation</p> <p>Service users are an important constituent in the council's approach to undertaking service reviews;</p> <p>Consultation with service users contributed significantly to the formulation of the Housing Services Development Plan;</p> <p>Involvement</p> <p>Arrangements have been introduced for public speaking at Area Plans Sub-Committee meetings (in relation to the determination of planning applications) in addition to statutory consultation processes;</p> <p>Participation</p> <p>Consultation is undertaken on some major policy issues (Parking Reviews, Local Plan, Town Centre Enhancement Schemes etc) amongst users and non-users;</p> <p>Tenants forums are held on a regular basis to discuss and address issues of concern;</p> <p>Arrangements have been introduced for the</p>			

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Key question	Strengths	Weaknesses	Score	Comments
	<p>public to ask questions at council meetings;</p> <p>The council's policy on the future management of its housing stock was agreed as a direct result of consultation with its housing tenants;</p>			
<p>Is the organisation clear on the consultation and engagement techniques and channels that they are going to use to achieve what they have set out to achieve?</p>	<p>Print/Media</p> <p>The council issues regular media releases to the local press and media;</p> <p>The council produces numerous advice and guidance leaflets;</p> <p>The Leader of the Council holds weekly media briefings on issues of importance and local interest;</p> <p>The council's 'Forester' magazine is distributed to all households and businesses in the district;</p> <p>Access Points</p> <p>The council currently operates four information centres and three area housing offices at various locations across the district;</p> <p>The council is investigating the possible establishment of a corporate customer contact centre;</p>	<p>There is a possible lack of inclusiveness in consultation efforts, where these are not always targeted at all minority communities;</p> <p>Consultation and engagement is often directed at representative organisations for all communities, rather than at users from within those communities, although this is difficult to achieve given the small ethnic minority population of the district;</p>	<p>3</p>	

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	<p>Website</p> <p>The council has devoted additional resources to the development of its website, following weaknesses identified in the CPA inspection of February 2004;</p> <p>In a recent independent survey, the council's website was ranked 24th out of 441 local authorities in terms of format and ease of use;</p> <p>A number of finance related payment services are currently available interactively through the website, with all other payment services to be available on-line within the next year;</p> <p>Surveys</p> <p>Surveys are generally carried out on an issue-led basis;</p> <p>The council undertakes general and service specific BVPI user satisfaction surveys every three years using professional pollsters;</p> <p>The council has undertaken staff attitude surveys amongst its employees;</p> <p>Non-user research has been conducted in relation to the council's leisure facilities;</p> <p>Consultation Fora</p>			

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Key question	Strengths	Weaknesses	Score	Comments
	<p>Consultation events have previously been held for partners, stakeholders and residents in respect of the annual Best Value Performance Plan;</p> <p>A public consultation forum was recently held in respect of the proposed introduction of wheeled bins to improve the council's recycling performance;</p> <p>Community Involvement</p> <p>Four area-based sub-committees have been introduced to deal with development control matters on a local basis;</p> <p>The Leader holds weekly 'Meet the Leader' sessions which any member of the public may book an appointment to attend, on any issue.</p>			

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Key question	Strengths	Weaknesses	Score	Comments
<p>Does the organisation ensure that these processes are resulting in improved service delivery and demonstrable change for users?</p>	<p>A register of the council's consultation exercises is reviewed annually by Overview and Scrutiny and provides an opportunity to review previous engagement efforts and avoid duplication;</p> <p>The council's licensing policy was developed and amended to reflect the views of consultees;</p> <p>The Council's Planning Protocol derives from extensive consultation with Parish and Town Councils, planning agents and the public.</p> <p>The results of consultation on parking reviews and town centre enhancement schemes has been fed into policy development and scheme designs for these issues;</p> <p>Local Council's Liaison Committee fosters and develops working relationships between the three tiers of local government in the district, and provides an opportunity to discuss local issues of concern across the full range of local government services. This is supported by a charter between District and Parish/Town Councils.</p>	<p>The council does not have a corporate methodology for evaluating the success of its consultation and engagement exercises;</p>	<p>2</p>	

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Key question	Strengths	Weaknesses	Score	Comments

Scoring key:

- 1 – Weak with few strengths
- 2 - Weaknesses outweigh strengths
- 3 - Strengths outweigh weaknesses
- 4 – Strong with few weaknesses

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What are your overall conclusions regarding the effectiveness of user focus in the council? What are the key improvements you think should be made ?

	Overall conclusions and key improvements needed
	<p>The Council has a wide range of consultation processes in place which provide diverse ways for citizens to participate in the development of services. However, it is possible that not all interests are represented, and that a wider corporate strategy could be useful in order to develop our overall approach. These issues are to be considered by a member group shortly.</p>