

EPHING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

PUBLIC CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT POLICY AND STRATEGY

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Epping Forest District Council has a statutory duty to provide responsive, value for money services and believes that effective public consultation and engagement is essential for the delivery of customer-focused services that meet the needs and aspirations of each of the diverse communities of the district. This Public Consultation and Engagement Strategy and Policy outlines:

- our overall approach to consultation;
- how consultation will be co-ordinated in order to ensure that it is beneficial to service provision and that resources are used effectively; and
- how the results and outcomes of consultation will be reported.

OUR CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT POLICY

The Council values public opinion and is committed to meaningful dialogue with residents and service users in order to shape the delivery of local services, especially in view of the authority's role of community leader, and aims to make the most effective use of consultation by:

- *setting out the Council's commitment to consulting residents and others on issues that affect service provision;*
- *adopting a co-ordinated, strategic approach to consultation that avoids duplication and ensures that results are acted upon wherever possible;*
- *ensuring that engagement is both inclusive and representative;*
- *consulting with our partners where appropriate and taking account of the results of their own consultation exercises; and*
- *regularly reviewing our approach to consultation activities so that we learn from and improve them.*

The Council seeks to encourage people to take part in discussion and debate on services, and to improve its links with local communities. We aim to do this by providing an opportunity for people to become involved in identifying local needs and influencing the authority's future policies and strategies. We recognise that consultation also helps the Council to measure its success in service delivery and supports its elected councillors in understanding the needs of the various communities of the district.

Our Public Consultation and Engagement Strategy highlights the importance of ensuring that formal consultation is carried out in a cost-effective and coordinated manner, and supports the central role of elected members of the Council as representatives and advocates of local communities.

2. OUR CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

2.1 We appreciate that consultation helps ensure that the Council provides the right services at standards that meet the expectations of users. Consultation is undertaken whenever necessary in order to:

- promote public engagement in the strategic planning, improvement and development of local services;

- ensure that the Council's policies, budgets and commitments are based on evidence of need; and
- monitor service delivery and ensure that resources are appropriately directed.

2.2 This Public Consultation and Engagement Strategy covers consultation undertaken in relation to issues affecting the Council's corporate operations and service specific matters. Regular on-going customer satisfaction surveys and consultation carried out in regard to planning applications are not regulated by this strategy.

3. WHO THE COUNCIL WILL CONSULT

3.1 In order to meet its duty to provide continually improving service standards, the Council will consult a wide range of people and organisations that are affected by the decisions it makes and the services it provides, including the following:

- those who pay Council Tax and/or business rates;
- those who pay rent to the Council;
- those who use, or are likely to use, the Council's services;
- those who chose not to use the Council's services;
- the town and parish councils in the district;
- people within the district who have a disability;
- minority ethnic communities in the district;
- other minority communities in the district;
- our partners such as Essex County Council and the local Primary Care Trust;
- the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership and other local voluntary organisations; and
- those who have an interest in what the Council does.

3.2 This list is not exhaustive, and the Council will undertake consultation with these and other individuals and groups relevant to particular issues. The Council will obtain the views of its elected members on specific issues through its decision making processes and direct consultation with Portfolio Holders and ward councillors, and will consult its staff on appropriate issues by way a of framework established as a result of the authority's accreditation under the national Investors in People scheme.

4. HOW THE COUNCIL WILL CONSULT

4.1 Consultation can be expensive to carry out and the Council will therefore always consult on a basis that is proportionate and relevant to the issue in question. Timeliness, targeting and access are vital elements of successful consultation initiatives and the Council will take positive steps to engage local people and will consult in a variety of ways to take account of particular issues and the diverse communities in the district. Consultation will generally set out proposals for future action or seek the views of the community in the development of options for improvement.

4.2 Consultation on specific issues will be carried out in a timely manner, in order to allow results to be analysed and properly inform decisions. Wherever possible, consultation exercises will be planned to allow realistic timescales for responses to be provided by consultees.

4.3 The Council appreciates that it needs to engage with communities and people who may be excluded from decision making processes, such as people with disabilities, ethnic minority groups, travellers, the elderly, and people from other minority communities (on the basis of nationality, faith, and sexuality), but recognises that it is not always easy to consult with these groups. Where possible the Council will approach community leaders or local and

national representative organisations to determine the most appropriate way of reaching these communities in order that access to consultation will be inclusive.

- 4.4 The Council will ensure that the objective of all consultation initiatives is made clear to participants, and that legislative or financial restrictions on the ability of the Council to agree particular courses of action are identified. Consultation will be appropriately targeted at relevant groups or communities and the Council will provide advice, information, translation or interpretation services and the preparation of material in relevant languages at appropriate times, as required. The Council will aim to ensure that venues used for holding consultation events are fully accessible to people with disabilities, and that consultation materials and all forms of communication can be printed to meet the needs of the sensory impaired.
- 4.5 The Council will utilise a variety of methods in order to ensure that as many people as possible have the opportunity to participate in consultation, including public/open meetings, focus groups, local media, user/resident surveys and questionnaires, and appropriate electronic delivery channels. Young people will be consulted through schools and colleges, youth and community centres and youth forums, and the elderly will be engaged through a variety of statutory and other organisations that offer services, advice and assistance to elderly persons. Where required, special arrangements will be identified to consult with the frail elderly, who may be largely housebound or live in residential accommodation.
- 4.6 Although the Council will carry out formal public consultation and engagement in a variety of ways and aims to ensure that consultation is inclusive and representative, some exercises such as the three yearly survey of resident satisfaction with a range of the Council's services and the quality of life in the district, are carried out at the direction of the Government. This survey requires the Council to consult a sample of citizens selected at random from the electoral register and may not therefore always be representative of the demography of the district.
- 4.7 In addition to undertaking resident consultation, the Council will consult and work closely with a range of statutory and voluntary partner agencies such as Essex County Council, the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership, town and parish councils, the Police and the local Primary Care Trust, in order to provide 'joined up' public services to residents of the district. The Council will also participate in countywide or similar consultation arrangements where appropriate
- 4.8 This Consultation Strategy builds upon existing communication and consultation methods including the Council's close working relationships with its partners, its information centres across the district, communications and briefings issued to the press and media, and the Council's quarterly 'Forester' magazine.

5. HOW CONSULTATION WILL BE CO-ORDINATED

- 5.1 The Council will coordinate its public consultation and engagement exercises in order to make the best use of its resources and to avoid duplication.
- 5.2 An annual Consultation Plan will be developed as part of the yearly business planning process, which will focus consultation on priorities and operational issues to be faced in the coming year. The Consultation Plan will be agreed by the Cabinet at the commencement of each financial year, setting out the issues on which the Council will consult during the next year, the overall objectives for each consultation exercise and how such exercises will be undertaken. In establishing this approach it is recognised that the need for some consultation exercises will arise subsequent to the development of the annual consultation

plan, as a result of unforeseen specific or priority issues. These issues will be evaluated at the end of the year and the results reported.

- 5.3 In planning public consultation and engagement, the Council will ensure that the most appropriate methodology is adopted for each exercise, that consultation is directed at the most relevant people, and that the best arrangements for carrying out the consultation are developed. A Consultation Toolkit has been developed to help the Council's staff with all aspects of planning and carrying out consultation exercises.
- 5.4 Planned consultation exercises will involve joint working arrangements wherever possible to minimise costs, and information and results from previous similar exercises will be shared as required with other public service providers in the district to avoid consultation overload or fatigue. This approach will enable the Council to streamline its consultation activity build up a significant record of customer views and satisfaction levels to inform future service planning.

6. HOW THE RESULTS OF CONSULTATION WILL BE REPORTED

- 6.1 The Council will endeavour to give feedback on the results of all consultation exercises after the results have been analysed. It will not always be legally or financially possible for the authority to accede to the wishes of consultees and, in such circumstances, the Council will provide an explanation of the reasons why particular courses of action identified through consultation are not agreed or implemented.
- 6.2 At the conclusion of every consultation exercise the relevant Head of Service will produce a summary of the views that have been expressed and the action that has been agreed as a result of the consultation, which will be made available to those that took part and any other interested parties.
- 6.3 The Council will produce an annual report to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panel and the Cabinet, reviewing the Consultation Plan for the previous year and detailing the results of all consultation exercises that have been undertaken during the previous twelve months, enabling its members to scrutinise consultation results and processes. This information will also be summarised within the annual Best Value Performance Plan.