

CABINET
13 September 2022

***PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

TITLE OF REPORT: 2022 – 27 Community Consultation Strategy

REPORT OF: Service Director, Place

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: Leader of the Council, Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg

COUNCIL PRIORITY: PEOPLE FIRST

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 To outline the Council's proposed approach to community consultation and engagement for the five-year period from 2022 – 2027.

1.2 To inform our residents on why, when and how we will consult them and encourage residents to sign up to ensure their views are heard in the future.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1. That Cabinet approves the Community Consultation Strategy for the period 2022-27.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1. Consultation is critical to demonstrate that the Council is committed to engaging with its community, to help shape the direction of future policies, to inform necessary improvement or refinements to services and to ascertain if current approaches to service delivery are meeting the needs of residents.

3.2. Our most recent District Wide Survey (DWS) highlights a decline in resident views since 2019 on how we consult with them. We need to proactively show that we are a council that listens and wants to engage with our residents by successfully implementing our community-facing strategy.

3.3. Increased forms of digital consultation will enable us to reach a wider audience more frequently.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

4.1. None.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

5.1. The Executive Member for Community Engagement, Leader of the Council, Deputy Leader of the Council and the Council's Political Liaison Board have been consulted on this strategy.

6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This report contains a recommendation on a key Executive decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on the 25 April 2022.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1 The last consultation strategy was adopted in 2015, with the original 2020 strategy review date extended to 2022 due to the pandemic and officer focus on COVID communications and recovery. An interim review of the strategy was carried out in 2018 with some recommendations being implemented (such as changing how we interact with our Citizens Panel, from a postal survey every two years, to sending them regular email surveys). Pressures from the pandemic on all services meant that some of the actions were paused.
- 7.2 The external environment has changed in ways we could never have imagined since the last consultation strategy was adopted. The pandemic saw huge advancements in digital technology e.g. TEAMS and Zoom, as many more people worked from home and digital channels e.g. websites, social media and e-news became crucial ways to reach people when face to face communication was not possible. This point can be further emphasised in increased public participation in Council meetings when held virtually during the pandemic and 'whole street' zoom meetings held by Councillors to discuss local issues during the pandemic period were also really well received and attended.
- 7.3 The increased emphasis on digital communications, plus our new corporate objective of 'People first' have led officers to consider new ways of consulting and engaging with our community, as outlined in our Community Consultation Strategy.
- 7.4 The purpose of the Community Consultation Strategy is not to consider the role of statutory consultation (where the requirement to consult is specified) but instead to consider the role of service specific consultation and opinion research exercises and how we involve our community.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

8.1 Resident perceptions of consultation by North Herts Council

- 8.1.1 Our most recent District Wide Survey results show a decline in resident views on how we consult with people since 2019. This could in part be because council officer resource was primarily focused on the pandemic/recovery from 2020–22 rather than proactively consulting.

Question area	2017	2019	2022
NHC make an effort to find out what local people want	35%	42%	37%
NHC involves, consults and engages with the community	46%	48%	42%
NHC should listen/consult more	19%	23%	20%

- 8.1.2 To deliver our 'People first' priority, we need to hear from our community, who know the district best and wherever possible, initiate two-way conversations i.e. consult earlier, share updates, actively publicise how we have utilised feedback, so that residents better understand how they have played a part in the process.

8.2 Future digital focus

- 8.2.1 A range of consultation channels are recommended, with a particular recommendation to increase digital forms of consultation to reach more residents, more frequently. This digital approach aligns with the Cabinet Office Consultation Principles of 2018 which state: We will use more digital methods to consult with a wider group of people at an earlier stage in the policy-forming process. We will make it easier for the public to contribute their views.
- 8.2.2 We have already increased our use of digital consultation tools by adopting Zencity's Engage platform (for larger surveys and soon to be used for key council project hubs) and are currently investigating Zencity's 'Community Surveys' platform which will provide us with a digital District Wide Survey which has the potential to reach a greater percentage of our population, twice a year, for less cost than the traditional telephone District Wide Survey.
- 8.2.3 Consideration will be always be given to the right tool for the type of consultation, as digital may not be the right consultation tool in some circumstances and a number of different consultation tools may be needed for certain consultations.

8.3 The role of councillors

- 8.3.1 Although a focus on digital consultation is recommended, and has been embraced by many councillors, the role councillors play in face-to-face community consultation should not be underestimated.

8.4 Practical Considerations

- 8.4.1 Sample size:** although not always mandatory to capture a 'representative sample' of the target population, it is ideal if you can and may mean two methods of consultation are needed to achieve this. Service areas will need to make it explicitly clear when reporting the results of consultation whether they are using a representative sample.
- 8.4.2 Timings:** The time period allowed, will depend on the nature, complexity and impact of the proposal – but as a general rule they might vary from between 2 to 12 weeks in length. Consultation exercises should not generally be held during pre-election periods and should avoid school holidays wherever possible.
- 8.4.3 Constitutional requirements:** The Council's Member/Officer Protocol on Working Arrangements states that wherever the Council undertakes any form of consultative exercise on a local issue, the Area Committee/Ward Members should be notified at the outset of the exercise.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Cabinet has within its terms of reference (5.6.1) to prepare and agree to implement policies and strategies other than those reserved to Council.

- 9.2 There are certain legal duties to consult although as per 7.4 – these are not covered in this Strategy. In non-statutory consultations it is up to the Authority to decide whether there is a duty to consult anyone and if so what ‘fair consultation’ entails in the circumstances. The government has issued consultation principles in 2013 that cover amongst other things, timing, transparency and feedback which apply to public bodies, although this document has no legal force. In this context, failure to act reasonably could, as a general principle, leave the Council open to legal challenge.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Strategic priorities funding has been allocated for the Engage Zencity platform for two years (2022 – 2024). This will give us sufficient time to assess its value, prior to potentially putting in a bid for permanent funding. Any funding bid would need to be considered in the context of overall Council resources and meeting Council priorities. The Council’s Medium Term Financial Strategy details that the Council will need to make budget savings and any investment will need to be off-set by an increase in the savings that need to be identified and delivered.
- 10.2 We are currently exploring Zencity’s ‘Community Surveys’ platform as an alternative to our traditional district wide surveys (DWS). This would enable twice-yearly surveys benchmarked against the LGA reputation tracker consultation questions. The costs for this would be met from within existing budgets.
- 10.3 Any service specific consultations requiring additional methodologies to the Zencity platform / Microsoft Forms or DWS e.g., focus groups etc will need to be funded by the relevant service area.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 There is reputational risk to the council were it to fail to carry out consultation on major service or policy changes and also risk that we did not meet our obligations under the ‘Duty to consult.’

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2. It is important to note that there will be members of the North Herts community who do not have access to digital channels. These residents should still be given the opportunity to participate in consultations by other means, particularly face to face consultation with councillors or joining in focus groups where relevant, and reasonable adjustments will be made available for those that require them.
- 12.3. ‘Assessing the approach to consultation’ in Appendix B, sets out a model for consultation which services should adopt. Part of this process is giving consideration to how any consultation activity will reach affected groups including minority and disadvantaged groups.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

13.1. The Social Value Act and “go local” requirements do not apply to this report.

14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

14.1. There are no known Environmental impacts or requirements that apply to the North Herts Council 2022 – 27 Community Consultation strategy

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

15.1 There are minimal human resource implications as a result of the Community Consultation Strategy.

15.2 A Consultation guide will be created to guide managers/officers through the consultation process. Teams needing to consult will need to play a part in creating consultation surveys and reviewing the results, as the council currently do not have dedicated consultation resource, other than through the communications team.

16. APPENDICES

16.1 Appendix A, North Herts Council 2022 – 27 Community Consultation strategy

16.2 Appendix B, Consultation Obligations, Assessing the approach to consultation and Process for determining consultation approach.

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