

EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

# CONSULTATION POLICY

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## SUMMARY

This policy sets out the principles on which the Council will consult with local people and groups about its policies and services. The aim of consultation is to improve the Council's services and to ensure that they meet the varied needs of different customers. The Council will consider when it is appropriate to consult with different audiences, including individual residents, partner organisations and parish councils. Some of the most common opportunities for consultation arise with the periodic review of an existing service, or the introduction of a new policy or service, and also during the normal day to day contact with customers. The Council will use a range of techniques, including large-scale representative surveys, and small-scale discussion groups. Two important examples are the two-yearly Place Survey, which asks residents about their perception of East Cambridgeshire and the services provided by the main public agencies; and the quarterly Neighbourhood Panels, where local people can request action about issues of concern in their immediate area.

Increasingly, the Council consults on and delivers services jointly with local partners. The two main mechanisms for this work are the East Cambridgeshire Sustainable Community Strategy, and the Cambridgeshire Local Area Agreement. To support this work and improve efficiency, the Council is a member of the Cambridgeshire Consultation Partnership. Working jointly with other authorities means that consultation is more co-ordinated and efficient. It also assists in maintaining a forward plan of consultation projects.

The general duty to consult applies to a number of specific roles across the Council, including: Members of the Council, who are responsible for representing the interests of their ward constituents; and senior managers, who must consider the needs of the various groups of people that may be affected by their policies and services. In particular, the Council might conduct consultation as part of an Impact and Needs Assessment, to see if certain groups may be negatively affected by its actions in a way that would be unfair. In principle, all members of staff must be focused on customer need and look for opportunities to report the opinions of those they are serving, so that services continually improve.

## 1.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 The overall aim of this policy is to improve the services and operations of the Council by understanding the needs of customers and others who are affected by its decisions.
- 1.2 Within this overall aim, there are six key objectives:
  - To maximise stakeholder engagement
  - To develop the Council's services to meet the range of needs of our different customers
  - To co-ordinate consultation across departments and partners
  - To develop the Council's ability to make effective use of consultation techniques
  - To maximise equality of consultation

- To exploit consultation opportunities arising from daily customer contact

## 2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 There are three good reasons why the Council should consult:

- First and foremost, the Council is committed to seeking the views of local people, staff and other partners to find out what stakeholders think of its services and how they can be improved. This consultation also extends to the development of new services and policies, as the Council changes in response to local needs and national legislation.
- Secondly, it has long been recognised that consulting people who use and pay for services is best practice. The involvement of service users and service deliverers in shaping a service makes it more responsive to the needs of local people and can lead to greater community ownership of local services. It will also be useful, through consultation with non-users, to establish why people do not use our services and eliminate any barriers to access.
- Thirdly, consultation is required by central government and many funding organisations. The Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 imposes upon local authorities a 'duty to involve'. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Equality Standard for Local Government also call for reasonable and proportionate consultation to ensure that discriminating barriers that prevent equal access to services are identified and removed.

## 3.0 THE SCOPE OF THIS POLICY

3.1 This policy will provide the guiding principles of how the Council will consult. It is not meant to be an exhaustive document encompassing everything we do, rather it will concentrate on:

- Why we consult
- Who we consult
- How we consult
- When we consult

3.2 This policy will help co-ordinate the extensive consultation already taking place within the Council and it will promote best practice to those engaged in consultation.

## 4.0 OUTCOMES OF THE CONSULTATION POLICY

4.1 The consultation policy will prove effective if:

- Consultation promotes “ownership” of issues among consultees
- Better decision-making has taken place
- More appropriate and effective services have been provided
- Improved co-ordination of consultation has taken place
- There has been more representative community involvement in Council decisions; and-
- Better integrated strategies with other partners are in place
- Equal access to services is promoted

## 5.0 EQUALITIES IN CONSULTATION

- 5.1 The Council has a duty to consult with, and consider the needs of, all sectors of the community when delivering services. It must also promote equality of opportunity and good race relations. These requirements are enshrined in a range of legislation, including: the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, and the Equalities Act 2006.
- 5.2 The Council will conduct Impact and Needs/Requirements Assessments (INRAs) on all Council policies and functions to assess their potential level of impact on differential groups within the district. The INRA process enables the Council to assess whether its services and functions are meeting the needs and requirements of all members of the local community or whether the Council should adapt current service provision.
- 5.3 As part of the INRA process, the Council may need to conduct consultation with specific groups within the community, to check that a policy will not cause them adverse impact, for example: people who have a disability, are from an ethnic minority or are on a low income.
- 5.4 Some minority groups in the local community may have very few members. In this case, consultation must be carefully managed to avoid ‘overloading’ individual consultees. Guidance on meeting the requirements of equalities consultation is provided by the Principal HR/Equalities Officer.

## 6.0 HOW AND WHEN WILL THE COUNCIL CONSULT LOCAL PEOPLE?

- 6.1 The primary responsibility and means for consultation is through the role played by the Members of the Council. As democratically elected representatives they are duty-bound to represent the views of their constituents. Throughout their term of office, Members will make themselves available to be contacted by residents of their ward without partiality.
- 6.2 In addition to the role played by individual Members, the Council has arrangements in place for public speaking and for receiving petitions.

Members of the public may attend committee meetings (except for confidential items), where they can also submit questions. They can submit petitions, which must be considered by the Council subject to certain conditions (further information about the rights of citizens in this area is available in the Council's constitution, available via the website A – Z at: [www.eastcamb.gov.uk](http://www.eastcamb.gov.uk) ).

- 6.3 The Council will consult local people on the planning, management and quality assurance of its services. This will take place as part of periodic 'Best Value' service reviews and also through day-to-day contact with members of the public and partners, utilising the Council's Customer Relationship Management system wherever possible.
- 6.4 The Council will also consult local people in the development and review of its policies, such as the Sustainable Community Strategy and Crime and Disorder Strategy. Consultation can also be used to identify and prioritise issues of importance to people at a very local or a district-wide level.
- 6.5 The Council will use a variety of methods to seek the views of local people (see Section 10). These methods should be appropriate and should, wherever possible, build on existing networks and groups within the district, rather than duplicate them. Importantly, consultation should be co-ordinated to avoid "consultation overload" and the results of consultation should be fed back to consultees to demonstrate their role in shaping Council policy and services. The latter point is particularly important in helping the Council manage community expectations.
- 6.6 In addition to consulting the general public, the Council will consider when it may be beneficial to consult with groups of individuals or organisations that represent members of the public, for example: community and voluntary groups, schools, and local businesses.
- 6.7 Every two years, the Council joins with partners to conduct the statutory Place Survey. This asks a range of quality of life and satisfaction questions of a representative sample of residents, to learn where public services may be improved. In addition to this, the Council invites members of the public and local groups to submit their names to a register of consultees. This provides a ready panel of interested parties who have agreed to comment on proposed policy and service changes.
- 6.8 The Council will maintain a central register of current and planned consultation, which will be an active document in use within all departments.
- 6.9 The Council will consult as early as possible in the decision making process to allow views to be taken into consideration.
- 6.10 The Council will make reasonable and proportionate efforts to consult groups and individuals that are traditionally considered "hard to

reach". Consultation, wherever possible, needs to ensure representation from those who are often excluded from the usual consultation process – especially young people, people with disabilities and those from minority ethnic groups. Documentation will therefore be provided in alternative formats and relevant languages upon request.

- 6.11 The rural nature of East Cambridgeshire presents particular challenges in ensuring that we consult with people throughout the district. The Council is keen to promote best practice in this area and encourages travelling exhibitions to inform people and consult with them at community events such as village fairs. An important means of reaching people in all parts of the district is the series of quarterly Neighbourhood Panel meetings. These take place in five areas of the district and give an opportunity for the public to meet with representatives of the main local public services, and see prompt action on their priority issues.
- 6.12 To improve the co-ordination and cost-effectiveness of consultation, the Council's Policy and Performance team will validate all public consultation projects before implementation. In addition, each service area will nominate an officer to receive training in consultation, to liaise with the P&P team, and to make an initial assessment of proposals from their area.

## 7.0 HOW AND WHEN WILL THE COUNCIL CONSULT ITS PARTNERS?

- 7.1 Increasingly, services are delivered to local people through a partnership of different agencies. Where this is the case, seeking the views of partner organisations is as important as seeking the views of service recipients.
- 7.2 The Council will continue to consult partners such as other statutory agencies, the voluntary sector and private businesses in the development of any policies and services that affect them. There are two principal means by which the Council consults and plans services jointly with partners: the Sustainable Community Strategy, which sets out the joint aims and objectives of the East Cambridgeshire Strategic Partnership; and the Local Area Agreement, which is a commitment made between central government and the main public agencies operating across the County, to achieve improvement in priority services in Cambridgeshire.
- 7.3 These are complemented by the quarterly Neighbourhood Panels referred to in paragraph 6.11, where partners are able to engage together and with members of the public, to agree on the priorities for action within each of the five panel areas across the district.
- 7.4 The Council will consider the benefits of consulting with voluntary and community groups as representatives of individual sectors of the

general public, especially where they are able to effectively speak on behalf of people who might otherwise find it difficult to engage in the democratic process.

- 7.5 Within the overall mix of consultation approaches that is adopted, the Council will balance the proportion that is undertaken with partner organisations and community groups, compared with that which is conducted directly with individual members of the public.

## 8.0 HOW AND WHEN WILL THE COUNCIL CONSULT WITH PARISHES?

- 8.1 The Council will include Parish Councils as a distinct consultee, when developing new policies and services. Mindful of the workload created for Parish Councillors and other consultees when circulating lengthy policy documents, the Council will endeavour to include a summary on each occasion to make the process more efficient.
- 8.2 The Council will aim to set realistic time periods for consultation, acknowledging the cycle of parish meetings. The normal period for consultation with parishes should be six weeks and should be extended to ten weeks if the period covers August or December. This timetable excludes statutory periods of consultation such as development control matters.
- 8.3 Where appropriate, the Council will use established channels of communication, such as the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Association of Local Councils (CPALC), and the Neighbourhood Panels, in order to benefit from the opportunity for parishes to discuss issues jointly.
- 8.4 The Council will adopt a positive approach to cross-border consultation with neighbouring councils e.g. Forest Heath District Council and Newmarket Town Council, where this would be beneficial to the development of policies and services affecting relevant areas of the district.
- 8.5 The Council will aim to feed back to Parish Councils following consultation.

## 9.0 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- 9.1 All Members and Officers will maintain a customer-focused approach to their work, looking for opportunities to improve services in line with customers' needs, specifically: -
- 9.2 Members of the Council will:-
- make themselves available to hear the views of their constituents
  - respond to constituents' enquiries and representations fairly
  - actively encourage citizen participation in decision-making

- balance the range of different interests and represent their ward as a whole without partiality
- 9.3 Executive Directors and Heads of Service will:-
- seek the views of their customers as part of periodic Best Value service reviews
  - seek the views of their customers when commencing a new service or planning a significant change in policy or procedure that is likely to affect customers
  - seek the views of partner organisations and consider opportunities for joint working when commencing a new service or planning a significant change in policy or procedure
  - work with the Head of Customer Services to maximise the opportunities for collecting feedback from day to day customer contact
  - nominate an officer from their area to liaise with the Policy and Performance Team on consultation matters.
- 9.4 Members of Staff will:-
- maintain an open and approachable manner toward customers, being ready to listen to any comment, suggestion or complaint, and record the details for the attention of their line manager
  - continually review their contact with customers and the effectiveness of the Council's systems and procedures to see where improvements can be suggested
- 9.5 The Policy and Performance Team will:-
- promote consultation with partners and opportunities for joint working through the East Cambridgeshire Strategic Partnership and the Cambridgeshire Together (Local Area Agreement) Board
  - promote joint consultation with partners and the public through the quarterly Neighbourhood Panel meetings
  - regularly review this Consultation Policy and monitor its effectiveness
  - provide guidance, training and support to staff in conducting consultation exercises
  - validate all consultation projects prior to their implementation
  - maintain an overview of consultation activity via a consultation calendar and provide regular reports on outcomes to the Council's Management Team
  - seek opportunities for improvements in costs and outcomes through joint consultation with wider partners across the county, by membership of the Cambridgeshire Consultation Partnership

## 10.0 METHODS OF CONSULTATION

- 10.1 Appendix A contains a description of some of the common forms of consultation that the Council might use. These broadly split into two types:
- Large scale representative survey – this involves asking an agreed set of questions of a random sample of people. Either members of the general public or a specific population that may be affected by the

subject under consideration. As a guide, a target of 500 responses will be set, in order for the results to be statistically representative of the wider population (within an acceptable margin of error). The questionnaire may be administered by post, web survey, over the phone or face to face.

- Small scale consultation group – a temporary or long-term small group, with a mix of members of the public or representatives of relevant interest groups, may be formed to investigate the issues underlying some of the headline opinions that we gain from a large-scale survey. This format allows us to ask in more detail why people have certain views and to explore options for improving the Council's policies and services to meet customer need.

10.2 As a general principle, the Council will consider all opportunities and methods in order to achieve effective consultation. As some of the more traditional techniques become long-established, it will become increasingly important to look at innovative ways of engaging with people. However, the cost of any method must be justified in terms of the benefit provided by the information that is sought. No single method of consultation is necessarily better than another and sometimes a combination of different techniques is necessary to get the views of a representative group.

10.3 An important element in any consultation exercise is to manage the expectations of consultees. A number of steps should be taken to ensure this:

- ensure consultation plans are proportionate to the issue at hand - don't raise expectations with extensive consultations
- share the aims of the exercise with consultees
- inform consultees of the timetable you are working to
- give consultees examples of some realistic possible outcomes (or use examples of changes brought about by previous consultations)

10.4 In order to develop an effective 'culture' of consultation, consultees should feel part of an exercise in which they have a continuing interest. Providing feedback to consultees on the overall results of a consultation is recognised good practice and should be timetabled as a routine part of any consultation plan.

## 11.0 CO-ORDINATION OF CONSULTATION EXERCISES

11.1 Each year, the central register of consultation activity should be used to generate a consultation plan that will be guided by this policy.

11.2 Departments should use the consultation diary (available through Outlook public folders) to provide details of proposed consultation exercises. In addition to providing information to the rest of the organisation, this will stimulate some of the forward planning

necessary to complete an effective consultation.

- 11.3 The consultation plan will be used to co-ordinate consultation activity across the organisation and ensure best value for money from our involvement in the Cambridgeshire Joint Consultation Contract.
- 11.4 Smaller consultation exercises will inevitably arise throughout the year. This plan will help officers establish where consultation exercises can be run together to ensure 'consultation overload' is avoided.
- 11.5 These exercises will also be monitored for progress towards equality.

## 12.0 RESOURCES

- 12.1 The Council is a member of the Cambridgeshire Consultation Partnership, which includes the police and health services and the other local authorities in the county. The group exists to improve the effectiveness of our consultation through joint working. A key benefit of the arrangement is the appointment of a single preferred contractor (MRUK). They provide the expertise and professional management that is required for large or complicated projects, and offer a significant cost saving compared with buying such services individually.
- 12.2 To make best use of consultation activities, the Council must develop a more sophisticated approach to consultation work. This can only be achieved by increasing the knowledge available within the Council. Currently, the Policy and Performance Team can provide expert knowledge on general consultation issues. In order to maximise the benefits of consultation, a basic level of knowledge should be developed throughout the Council, taking advantage of the expertise available within the contractor organisation and other members of the Joint Consultation Contract Partnership.
- 12.3 Consultation requires a commitment to listen. It may also require specialist skills to facilitate discussion and to mediate where there are opposing views. Many of these skills are already present in the organisation. Training will continue to be provided to ensure appropriate staff and Members have the skills to consult effectively.
- 12.4 Some specialist consultation skills do not exist within the Council, or may already be engaged elsewhere. In these circumstances it may be necessary to bring in specialist consultants such as the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation to facilitate exercises such as "Planning for Real". Resources to fund external specialists will need to be identified in the early stages of any consultation exercise.
- 12.5 A key element in delivering a forward planned consultation diary and developing a more effective overall approach is the input of the Council's Heads of Service Group, a meeting of senior managers from

all departments, which has consultation as one of its standing items.

- 12.6 Each consultation project or exercise will need to establish its own financial and other resources and this should be included in any project plan. Many forms of consultation are not expensive but can be resource intensive in terms of people to facilitate and receive feedback.

### 13.0 FURTHER GUIDANCE AND CONTACTS

A list of common consultation techniques is included in the appendix. Guidance on conducting some of these exercises is available to staff on the Council's Intranet.

For further information about any of the matters below, please check the A – Z on the Council's website: [www.eastcambs.gov.uk](http://www.eastcambs.gov.uk) or speak to the relevant contact officer:

[Neighbourhood Panels](#) – for dates and locations of this year's meetings and general enquiries:

Contact: Alan Williams

Email: [alan.williams@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:alan.williams@eastcambs.gov.uk)

Tel: 01353 665555

[Register of Consultees](#) (listed under 'Consultation' on the A-Z) – for further information and to register your name and areas of interest:

Contact: Nicole Pema

Email: [nicole.pema@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:nicole.pema@eastcambs.gov.uk)

Tel: 01353 665555

[Complaints, Comments and Suggestions](#) – about any area of the Council's policies and services:

Contact: Customer Services

Email: [customerservices@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:customerservices@eastcambs.gov.uk)

Tel: 01353 665555

[Consultation Policy](#) – for any other questions about the Council's consultation work:

Contact: Simon Fraser

Email: [simon.fraser@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:simon.fraser@eastcambs.gov.uk)

Tel: 01353 665555

## APPENDIX A – COMMON CONSULTATION TECHNIQUES

Particular care should be taken to select consultation techniques appropriate to the circumstances, and interpret the results appropriately. For example, a focus group of 12 people may provide a depth of analysis on specific issues, but cannot be used to reliably portray the views of the overall population.

In planning consultation activities, further advice is available from the Policy and Performance Team.

### PUBLIC SPEAKING AND PETITIONS AT COUNCIL MEETING

One way of consulting people is for individuals or groups to speak directly to Council Members by presenting petitions or by asking questions in Council meetings. This process enables local people to make their views heard in the presence of Councillors who make Council decisions. The Council publishes agendas for Council meetings in advance to allow greater access by the public and publishes all forward agendas on the Council's internet site, as well as committee minutes and decisions.

### REGISTER OF CONSULTEES

Members of the public and organisations can register their interest in specific areas of the Council's work and volunteer to engage in related consultation exercises as they arise. Where this list is used to recruit focus groups, care must be taken to ensure that an appropriate mix of participants is invited.

### PUBLIC MEETINGS AND WORKSHOPS

Open meetings are often used to gain the public's views on a range of issues. Meetings work well when they are widely publicised and focus on particular issues of interest to a specific group of people. An example of this would be a public meeting on a major planning issue affecting a single village or town. Meetings are not useful if the target audience is unable to reach the venue or it is held at a time when people are unable to attend. Meetings need to be planned carefully to ensure the maximum attendance of the public. Special attention should be paid to accessibility and whether there is a need for a crèche or other provision for individual needs.

Workshops are a variation of a meeting and allow people to get together in small groups within the meeting to discuss issues. Workshops generally require more work and organisation but often result in more representative and in-depth views of people attending. This method was used to good effect in the preparation of the Economic and Community Development Strategy.

### WHOLE SYSTEMS EVENTS

A whole systems event is designed to bring all the key consultees together at one location, for a participative workshop-based discussion. Usually the aim is to complete all the discussion during one day, producing a report at the event that is the basis for any further action. This type of event is very resource intensive, perhaps requiring large venues, administrative and technical support, catering and a number of trained facilitators.

These events are usually used in partnership working and for the planning of specific actions that require many inputs. A typical attendance for a whole systems event may be 50 carefully selected "key players", but events involving the general public can require many more attendees.

#### FOCUS GROUPS

A focus group is when a small group of people (usually 12 or less) is brought together to discuss a particular issue or topic in depth. A good example of this is a customer panel in which small group of service users are brought together to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a particular service. An example of a successful focus group was the Waste and Recycling Events held in 2007 in preparation for the new Waste contract.

#### QUESTIONNAIRES AND SURVEYS

Questionnaires and surveys are useful in obtaining views from a representative sample of the population and views on the quality of a particular service.

Consulting people on a current service or policy through surveys can help influence new policy in the future. An example of this is the survey of residents of new housing estates in Ely. The information received will help the Council plan more sustainable housing developments in the future.

#### VILLAGE AND COMMUNITY APPRAISALS

An appraisal is when groups within a village or community get together and carry out a survey of all or a sample of the village using a questionnaire. The questionnaire usually covers a wide range of topics of interest to the local community. The group collects and collates the information and draws up an action plan based on the results. In some cases household results are developed by separate questionnaires of particular groups, such as young people. A community appraisal is an excellent way to bring people together to agree on what needs to be done locally.

#### USER PANELS

A user panel is made up of a small group of users and senior managers who meet to discuss user concerns. The panel will generally meet regularly over a long period. The advantage of this method of consultation is that it creates a continuing dialogue with users and gains a distinctive user perspective. An example of this is the consultative user panel set up by development control as part of the best value review of this service.

#### COMMENTS AND COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES

The Council has a Customer Care Code and official Complaints Procedure. Guidelines are available from the Customer Services Team. It is good practice to ask for comments and complaints from service users and staff as it gives information on strengths and weaknesses and how services can be improved.

#### OPEN DAYS, EXHIBITIONS AND 'PLANNING FOR REAL'

Open days and exhibitions are good methods of presenting options where people have a choice about the way forward. These forms of consultation allow people sufficient time to consider alternatives and make choices based on information on display and are useful for discussing changes to the built environment, such as housing schemes or transport plans.

'Planning for Real' is a type of open day and exhibition in which there are no pre-set options or plans. Usually, a model is constructed of the development site and people are invited to participate in the construction of the model and to make on-going visits to the model with their suggestions. This method is great fun and can bring whole communities together to consider different ideas for a particular area or building site. This idea was used by the Broad Street Working Party to consult people on the use of the former Jewson site on Ely riverside, now Jubilee Gardens.

#### VISIONING EXERCISES

Guided visualisation brings together small groups of people to develop a shared vision of the future and how to achieve it. This method is particularly good in engaging people at the start of a new strategy and was used successfully in the development of the Council's original sustainability strategy. Visioning can also be done through the arts where groups are asked to express their views or visions, for example through painting. This is particularly useful with young people who may be reluctant to get involved in traditional forms of consultation.

#### DISTRICT NEWSLETTER

The district newsletter 'East Cambridgeshire' is an important vehicle for distributing information about the Council to local people. It also has the advantage of encouraging feedback on issues. A separate newsletter 'Business Update' is issued on a quarterly basis focusing on business issues for local firms.