

Community Engagement – Scrutiny Management Board

1. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of community engagement within a public sector context, including setting out the statutory duties of a local authority to consult and to clarify the difference between engagement and consultation. The paper sets out the proposed approach for the budget consultation 2024/25. The paper also includes information on the role of scrutiny in the consultation process and different types of engagement activity and when they should be used.

2. Introduction

Over the past 3 years Herefordshire Council has demonstrated a strong commitment to engaging its residents through its commissioning of meaningful and genuine community engagement activities. The Council engages with residents throughout the year, across many different service areas using a range of engagement methods. The Council has been involved in a variety of good practice initiatives over recent years, intended to drive up the level and quality of community engagement e.g. Pop-up consultation stands, The Herefordshire Citizens Climate Assembly and targeted consultation with hard-to-reach groups. Examples of the impact of these approaches is provided in Appendix A. Whilst there has been a strong commitment to engage communities in a more meaningful and empowering way during the past three years, a more strategic council-wide approach is required to ensure that engagement activity is undertaken in a more efficient and consistent way that makes best use of available resources whilst helping to build stronger, more trusting relationships with its residents.

3. What is the purpose of Community Engagement?

The purpose of Community Engagement is to ensure that local people:

- Feel well informed about local issues.
- Have opportunities to get involved, influence local decision making and to tell the Council what they think about its policies, procedures and service delivery.
- Play an active role in shaping Council services.

New Conversations LGA Guide to Engagement is a comprehensive guide for councillors and officers wanting to build a stronger dialogue between council and community.

<https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/New%20Conversations%20Guide%2012.pdf>

4. What is the difference between community engagement and consultation?

The term 'engagement' is a broad term used in this context to describe anything that encourages productive relationships between communities and public bodies. A good definition is,

“Developing and sustaining a working relationship between one or more public body and one or more community group, to help them both to understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences.”¹

Community engagement encompasses a wide range of activities which can take many different forms. Examples of community engagement activity include: listening events, surveys, workshops, focus groups, roadshows, forums, citizens assemblies and citizen panels. The key thing that distinguishes these different types of engagement activity is the **level of public participation** as illustrated below. This moves from low levels of participation (e.g. listening events or roadshows)

¹ Elected Member Briefing Note, Improvement Service and TCI, 2013

that are about informing residents about proposed plans without seeking their views to high levels of participation that involve the devolution of decision-making responsibilities to the public.

Every type of involvement is important in the community engagement process and different approaches will be used depending on the issue and the circumstances.

1. **Information-giving:** where residents are informed, but have no influence E.g. Face-to-face meetings, newsletters, posters in public places, letters and flyers, press releases for local radio and television, website
2. **Consultation:** where residents can inform decisions, but don't have the final say E.g. Stakeholder meetings, interviews, public meetings and forums, surveys, questionnaires, focus group discussions, street stands.
3. **Co-production:** where things are done jointly, acting together E.g. Stakeholder meetings, workshops, discussions, action planning meetings, participatory stakeholder mapping, participatory planning and implementation, co-production of services, taskforces, planning groups, strategic alliances and formal agreements
4. **Supporting citizen power:** where residents lead and the council stands back E.g. Community development, community run services, devolution of LA budgets.

Consultation is one of the most common forms of engagement activity undertaken by public bodies but is also a term that is commonly misunderstood. Consultation is a type of engagement activity and is used to describe any activity that gives local people a voice and an opportunity to influence important decisions. It involves listening to and learning from local people **before decisions are made or priorities are set.** A good definition of consultation is:

“The dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action.”²

Consultation will also have a clear beginning, middle and end. It might be part of an ongoing, continuous period of engagement, but it is a process. Its remit should be finite and the scope for stakeholder input should be clear.

5. Engaging hard to reach communities

Engaging with individuals / communities that are hard to reach is an important part of community engagement and consideration needs to be given as to the best routes to engaging these groups. This may be through working closely with community leaders and VCS organisations that work within / with marginalised groups or utilising existing networks for hard to reach communities. It is also important to identify the barriers that make engagement more difficult for certain groups of people and to ensure that these obstacles are wherever possible removed in order to encourage and support engagement.

6. Do we have to consult with residents?

Whilst Councils are not duty bound to consult with residents on all major decisions, there are some areas such as budget-setting, planning and re-developments where they have a statutory requirement to consult. Statutory consultations are bound by legal requirements, such as Best Value legislation, and have strict rules surrounding how they should be conducted. Failure to run a statutory consultation in line with the rules leave the authority liable for a judicial review so it is

² National Standards for Community Engagement, Scottish Community Development Centre

important to be clear about these guidelines. Page 35 of the New Conversations LGA Guide to Engagement document provides further details about statutory provisions relating to consultation.

7. Why consult if we don't have to?

Whilst consultation can be resource and time intensive the benefits of considered and meaningful consultation can be far reaching and result in more effective use of resources and the development of more trusting and supportive relationships between the council and its residents. Additional benefits also include:

- improving planning, policy and decision making
- accessing new information, ideas and suggestions
- encouraging greater participation in the activities of the council
- to govern by consent (a full and fair consultation, with careful consideration of all views, can strengthen the legitimacy of the prevailing view among those people not in favour of the final decision)
- measuring residents' satisfaction with the council
- shaping council activities around residents' needs and aspirations

8. Choosing a consultation method

When thinking about what method to use it's important to think about what you want the exercise to achieve, the resources and time you have available and the stakeholders you want to engage in the consultation. The key thing to remember is that **unless there's scope for consultees to influence a decision, then it shouldn't be called a consultation**. There is no one size fits all when choosing a consultation method – there are multiple ways to engage, techniques and preferences continuously evolve, and each council has its circumstances, priorities, and local audiences. Appendix B is a list of methods of engagement and the pros and cons of using them.

9. Proposed approach for Budget Consultation 2024/25

Our proposed approach, outlined below, is based on the success of previously using pop-up market stalls to inform people about the budget setting exercise and gathering their views of some of the potential cost saving proposals on the table. This approach has also been used as a way of taking a temperature reading about the value that people place on certain services through the use of token-boxes, it also provides people with the opportunity to ask questions about the budget process and to raise non-budget related questions. The market-stall approach is an effective way of engaging a wider demographic and is used alongside the annual on-line budget consultation survey.

The proposed budget consultation approach would include the delivery of:

- 7 locality-based pop-up consultation events mid-October to early December – 2 in Hereford High Town and one in each of the other market towns. Using a range of interactive methods to gauge public opinion on the key issues relating to the 24/25 budget. The final approach and focus of consultation would be developed in conjunction with the Director of Resources & Assurance.
- 2 consultation sessions with specific hard to reach groups e.g. young people, families in hardship.
- An on-line consultation session with businesses via the Economic Development Teams quarterly business briefings.
- A consultation session with the Community Partnership (22 November tba).

- A consultation session with Parish & Town Councils.
- An online feedback session sharing the results of the consultation.

The output from the consultation will be a report and a PowerPoint presentation summarising the consultation findings.

The role of Scrutiny in the consultation process

Whilst there is no specified role for Scrutiny in the consultation process consideration should be given to the following;

1. Ensuring proposals that are being consulted on are still at a formative stage i.e. A final decision has not yet been made, or predetermined, by the decision makers.
2. That the approach and methods to be used are appropriate given the scale and nature of the issue.
3. That there is sufficient information during the consultation process to give 'intelligent consideration.' Does the information provided relate to the consultation? Is it available, accessible and easily interpretable for consultees to provide an informed response?
4. That there is adequate time for consideration and response. There must be sufficient opportunity for consultees to participate in the consultation. There is no set timeframe for consultation, despite the widely accepted twelve-week consultation period, as the length of time given for consultee to respond can vary depending on the subject and extent of impact of the consultation.
5. That 'Conscientious consideration' is given to the consultation responses before a decision is made. Decision-makers should be able to provide evidence that they took consultation responses into account.
6. That findings of the consultation and subsequent decisions are fed back in the public domain.
7. That the views of those that do not usually engage in consultation processes have been actively sought and measures taken to ensure the consultation process is accessible to all potential stakeholders.

Appendix A

Examples of successful engagement:

Seldom heard groups

The Health and Well-being Strategy Development, Impact of Covid on Families (financial hardship) and the Budget consultations were very successful at engaging with members of Herefordshire's public that typically do not engage with public consultations for a number of reasons. By identifying groups that may not typically engage, and creating an accessible opportunity by suitable times, venues, resources such as interpreters, translations, and easy read versions has given a better opportunity for the wider population to share their views.

Specific groups engaged include:

Younger people through Herefordshire Sixth Form College, Young Farmers ploughing match in Dorstone, and SHYPP Leominster; Care experienced Young People through Herefordshire Council's contacts; Older people through Age UK; Families on lower incomes through contacts at food banks, family days through the Holiday activities and food programme (HAF) and those in receipt of social housing through providers such as Connexus; Women's, Men's and LGBTQ+ Groups; Carers and Parent Carers through Crossroads Together and Parent Carer Voice Herefordshire; those with disabilities through Echo and the Keeping it Real Board; Veterans with the Veterans Support Centre and the Veterans Mental Health Nurse; Gypsy and Romany Travellers with the use of Peer Research from within the community; Eastern European migrants through Catholic Churches and refugees from Afghanistan and Syria through City of Sanctuary.

Engagement across Herefordshire

Herefordshire is a largely rural county encompassing Hereford City and its five market towns. Engagement across all of these areas is vital to gain the whole view of the county. Herefordshire Council's consultation for developing of the priorities for the Corporate Plan as well as yearly budget consultations have been successful at engaging residents from across the county by providing market stall style engagements.

Specifically using a market stall pop-up approach for the budget consultations and priority settings for the Corporate Plan, has allowed these consultations to reach a wider demographic. 'Popping up' where residents are in their localities using engaging methods such as token boxes or visual sticky dots on charts, make engaging with the consultation quick and easy if people have limited time or enabling more in-depth discussion if time allows. In last year's budget consultation, 2022, over 420 people participated.

Businesses and Voluntary and Community Groups have also been engaged through suitable channels such as Quarterly Business Briefings with Herefordshire Council and Herefordshire Community Partnership.

In-depth engagement

When a subject is too detailed to discuss in a simple consultation exercise, more in-depth methods are used, with the example being Herefordshire's first Citizen's Assembly which focused on the climate emergency. 40 representative participants across Herefordshire were recruited to hear from a team of experts, around three main topics; Transport, Buildings and Food, Farming and Land use (decided by the Stakeholder and Steering Group) before they collectively made recommendations to

Herefordshire Council and its partners about 'How should Herefordshire meet the challenges of Climate Change?'. For more information see Herefordshire Council's website:

<https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/council/citizens-assembly#:~:text=In%20January%202022%2C%20the%20Herefordshire,what%20steps%20should%20be%20taken.>

Real impacts

Consultation is only successful if it is able to influence decision making. Very real changes being made as a result of consultation proves successful engagement. Examples of how recent consultation has influenced strategy and decision making include

- The Health and Wellbeing Being Board reduced the number of priorities in its strategy from 12 to two very clear priorities that were identified as being the most important by all of those consulted.
- The Herefordshire Citizens' Climate Assembly identified 35 recommendations within the themes of buildings; transport; and food, farming and land-use, and in turn resulted in an action plan and 13 projects for Herefordshire Council and its partners.
- During the most recent budget consultation, December 2022, residents were asked about a number of options in which they strongly supported continuing discounts for council tax for those most in need, raising income in ways in which means residents can afford to fund services and helping communities to help themselves. Therefore these three proposals were taken forward out of the six presented.

Appendix B

Methods of engagement

Method	Pros	Cons
Public Meetings	Large numbers of people can participate at once. Allows for full “community” input. Enables community to be involved in the process.	Attendance may be low if there is little/no interest, or no incentives are offered. Strong personalities can influence and sway discussion or stop discussion altogether. Attendees may not be representative of community.
Focus Groups are guided discussions of a small group of citizens. They are normally one-off sessions although several may be run simultaneously in different locations.	Can be directed at specific target audiences (youth, underrepresented, leaders). Conflict and strong personalities are easier to handle. Follow up questions are easily provided.	Attendees may not be representative of community. Facilitators are usually required. Strong personalities can influence and sway discussion or stop discussion altogether.
Online consultations utilise the internet to ask a group of people their opinion on an issue (typically a policy in the development stages). An unlimited number of participants can be sent information about the subject or download it online and respond via email or comment on the website.	Allows a large number of people to contribute. Gives all participants an 'equal voice'. Can reach people who are unlikely to respond to traditional engagement methods. A quick and accessible mode of engagement from the participants' perspective. Allows participants to discuss an issue at their convenience (regardless of location or time) Anonymity of online processes can encourage open discussion.	Excludes people who do not or cannot access/navigate the internet. Can generate unmanageable amounts of material. Written communication can be a barrier for some already marginalised groups. Any perceived complexity, such as registration, can be a barrier to participation
Interviews	Easy to identify and hear from target population. Attendance is consistent and reliable. Follow up questions are easily provided. Participants are easily contacted for more information, or post-implementation feedback.	Does not offer any real sense of community engagement. May contain personal bias. Results may be influenced by individual administering. Can be a lengthy process.
Survey	Can cover a great deal of information. Can require very little time to gather feedback from many. Reduction in administration bias. Can fill gaps in population level data for small communities.	Can be a lengthy process. Respondents may not represent a good snapshot of the community. If not designed well (professionally), answers may not be useable. Do not

		offer any real sense of community engagement.
Citizen Assembly A group of people who are brought together to discuss an issue or issues and reach a conclusion about what they think should happen. The people who take part are chosen so they reflect the wider population	The process can be high profile and provide a good way of drawing attention to an issue. Can bring out diverse perspectives on complex and contested problems. Decision makers brought face-to-face with citizens or those with lived experience of an issue.	Gaining a broadly representative group of people can be challenging and expensive. The process for developing and planning an assembly is intensive and demanding on human and time resource. Running a citizens' assembly is a highly complex process requiring significant expertise
Citizen Panel A panel which can have a small number of people (dozens) or a large number (thousands) who are representative of the local community, who are periodically surveyed through questionnaires and focus groups.	Can be sponsored and used by a partnership of local agencies. Allows you to target specific groups if large enough. Allows surveys or other research to be done at short notice. Assessing local service needs and identifying priorities.	Needs considerable staff support to establish and maintain. Responses to surveys often reduce over time, particularly among young people. Can exclude certain residents who do not feel comfortable participating in this way and should not be the only form of engagement.
Street stalls: These are outdoor displays, such as idea or graffiti walls, used to capture the views and comments of many people. Maps and plans for an area or project can be displayed and passers-by are asked to comment, generate ideas or cast votes.	Visual form of consultation – good for PR of Council. Good opportunity for public to speak to Officers / Councillors face-to-face. Can get views from a good cross section of the community. Good for 'temperature reading' on key issues.	Not suitable for imparting in-depth information. Weather can impact on levels of engagement. Requires multiple people to capture feedback.