

Getting Involved -

make participation count

Wealden Community
Engagement Strategy

October 2013

Inform



Consult



Collaborate



Involve



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Prepared by: Corporate Policy

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0.1 Draft	02/04/13	F. Berry	Draft for public consultation
0.2	16/10/13	F. Berry	Post public consultation amendments: minor textual changes and amended to include changes in the Statement of Community Involvement regulations at Appendix A. Final Version
0.3	18/08/15	F. Berry	Wealden panel removed (disbanded)

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Summary

Community engagement encompasses a wide variety of activities ranging from information giving, to consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering.

The Council's vision of employing fewer people directly and providing more services in partnership with others emphasises the need to ensure that we are engaging with our communities and partners in an effective and efficient manner.

This strategy seeks to ensure that we take a coordinated approach to our engagement activities. It includes a set of principles to help guide the way in which we undertake engagement activities and identifies key objectives to help direct and further improve our engagement practices.

Early engagement in the development stage of the strategy has helped to inform its content and ensure it reflects the needs of the people in our district.

1. Introduction

As we look to the future, the Council will need to make a number of significant changes in the way it resources and delivers its functions in order to continue to deliver effective and efficient services to our customers. The vision of how the Council will operate in the future places community engagement and involvement at the heart of these changes:

By 2015, the Council will

- Lead local communities with partners, especially Town and Parish Councils;
- Encourage decisions to be made at the lowest practical level;
- Employ fewer people directly and provide more services in partnership with others;
- Continue to ensure that all service providers are held to account.

In order to achieve these aims we need to engage with our communities so that we know more about their needs, aspirations and capacity. We recognise that our communities have a wealth of knowledge and experience as residents, users of our services, businesses and voluntary and community groups. This knowledge and experience is invaluable in helping to shape the delivery of services that best meet the needs of our community and make Wealden a better place to live and work.

We are not starting from scratch. There is a long established commitment to engaging with our communities in Wealden. Our local District Councillors are one of our principal assets; elected to represent their community, they provide the essential link between the decision-making process and the community. This strategy builds upon and strengthens that community leadership role.

The strategy outlines the way in which we will engage with communities, individuals and organisations to involve them in shaping the policies, plans and services that affect life in our District. It aims to ensure that we continue to take a coordinated approach to engagement and involvement across the Council, that we include local people appropriately as part of the Council's decision-making process and that we enhance support for our elected Councillors in their role as community leaders.

Engaging with our communities not only helps us to tailor our services to local people's needs, it can also provide a number of other benefits. For those who participate it can encourage democratic involvement, build knowledge and skills, create a sense of ownership and provide a greater understanding of competing demands on resources. As a Council it helps us understand local needs and take evidence-based decisions, improve our monitoring of performance and helps to meet our statutory obligations.

In developing this strategy we have talked to a wide range of different people and groups. Their priorities and comments have helped to shape its content and ensure it reflects the needs of the people in our district.

2. Purpose of the Strategy

This strategy has been developed to strengthen our existing community engagement practices. It provides a coordinated approach to engagement activities across the Council to ensure that the way we engage, with whom, how and when, is effective, efficient and achieves real benefits. It does not prescribe community engagement methods but is a guide to developing and extending good practice. It includes a set of clear **principles** to be used when carrying out engagement activities and identifies key objectives to direct and improve future activities. A delivery plan to accompany the strategy will also be developed to identify targets and outcomes for improving community engagement in the district.

The strategy is for everyone who has a role to play in designing and implementing community engagement activities on behalf of the Council. It also provides a concise summary of the Council's commitment to community engagement for anyone with an interest in engagement practices.

The following diagram illustrates the importance of the links between our communities, District Councillors and Council officers in achieving successful engagement.



3. Our Objectives

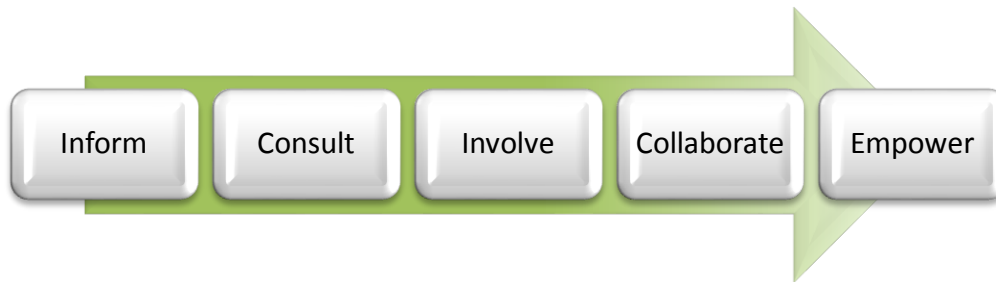
To help deliver our strategy and further improve and expand our engagement practices, we have identified five key objectives to:

- Support and promote elected District Councillors in their role as community leaders
- Promote better knowledge and understanding of engagement principles, methods and resources
- Create stronger links between communities and decision makers
- Reduce inefficiency and duplication in engagement practice
- Evaluate the outcome of engagement activity and the effect it has had

These objectives will be achieved by setting and completing actions in our delivery plan for the strategy.

4. What is Community Engagement?

There are many different definitions and types of community engagement – “informing”, “consulting”, “involving” etc. and so it is important to establish a shared understanding of the terms. We can think of these as a spectrum of increasing levels of engagement from informing through to empowering. Depending on the project, community engagement may involve more than one type of activity at various stages.



Informing lets people know what is happening with a Council project and/or process. This could be via a newsletter, media release, social media, fact sheet, website or public information event.

Consultation can be used for a number of reasons: to gather views and new ideas, to test options and preferences, or to understand possible unintended consequences of a policy or project. Information is provided on the options available or decisions taken, views are listened to, and feedback is given on how those views have influenced the decision. This could take the form of a focus group, public meeting, survey or public comments.

Involving actively includes people in the development and decision making processes of a project to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are reflected in the options that are developed and the decisions taken. This will include *informing* and often also consultation.

Collaboration is to partner with the community in each aspect of a project including the development of options and identification of preferred solutions. Advice and innovation will be sought from the community and recommendations will be incorporated into decisions to the maximum extent possible. This could include citizen advisory committees, consensus building, and participatory decision making.

Empowerment places the final decision-making in the hands of the community. It is the most ambitious level of engagement where communities develop and implement their own plans with support from public and voluntary organisations.

All these types of engagement are important and all have their merits. However, the type of engagement undertaken will depend on the project – whether it is at the concept stage when nothing has been decided, or the decision stage when you have some information to work with, or the implementation stage when it is usually just for information only. There are also a variety of methods and tools ranging from media releases and online surveys to focus groups and public meetings, which can be used to help achieve the different types of engagement.

5. Our Community Engagement Principles

By listening to what people have been telling us about improving our engagement methods and taking account of best practice, we have established the following five principles to guide the way in which we engage with people.

Our community engagement will be:

Proportionate and targeted

The type and extent of an engagement activity will be in proportion to the potential impacts of the proposal and targeted towards those who will be affected. The emphasis is on understanding the effects of a proposal and ensuring real engagement with those affected.

Accessible

Engagement activities will use the most appropriate tools for the intended audience and effective methods should be used when seeking to engage with under-represented groups and those that have special requirements. This could range from a press release or electronic survey to a focus group or public meeting and, depending on the audience, may require the provision of translation services, accessible venues or other measures.

Clear and concise

Information issued as part of an engagement activity, whether through a media release, consultation document, or other method, will be clear, concise and written in plain English. It should also make clear the aim of the engagement activity, whether it is just for information or whether views being sought and what potential there is for influence.

Open and honest

We will only conduct consultations when there is real scope for people to have an impact and influence decisions. There is little point in wasting resources and good will by consulting on something that has already been decided. Consultations should therefore take place in good time to inform a decision and be clear and open about what can and cannot be influenced. The results of a consultation exercise and the outcome (or decision taken) should be made available to participants.

Timed appropriately

Engagement will begin as early as possible in a project development and the timeframe for consultation should be proportionate and realistic to allow enough time for people to understand the issues and respond. This will vary depending on the type and impact of a proposal but where responses are sought from voluntary or community groups or where the issue is particularly complex, a period of 12 weeks should be allowed wherever possible.

6. Engagement Tools Already in Place

We already use a variety of community engagement mechanisms and tools to help us engage with our communities effectively. An overview of some of these is shown below.

Wealden District Councillors

Consult and engage with the community in their role as elected representatives and community leaders e.g. surgeries, meetings etc

Resident Involvement groups

Provide forums in which to raise and discuss current issues e.g. Wealden's Residents Action and Disability Involvement Groups.

Engagement Toolkit

Contains best practice to help plan, design and choose the right methods to implement effective engagement activities.

Consultation Diary

A searchable online diary containing current, forthcoming and previous consultations and their results.

Council Officer Groups

Communications, Equalities and user groups exchange ideas, advice and best practice.

Website and Social Media

The Wealden Website and social media (e.g. facebook and twitter) provides methods of information exchange.

Survey Software

Enables better design and analysis of electronic and paper questionnaires.

7. How to Get Involved

There are lots of ways to get involved, many of which have already been outlined in this document. A good starting point is to visit our webpages where you can find the details of your local District Councillor, take part in a consultation, tell us your comments and suggestions or ask the Leader a question. You can also contact us using the contact details below:

Postal Address

Council Offices
Vicarage Lane
Hailsham
East Sussex
BN27 2AX

Website

www.wealden.gov.uk

Email

pr@wealden.gov.uk

Telephone

01323 443322

View our current consultations



www.wealden.gov.uk/consultations

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Appendix A National and Local Requirements

There are many national and local requirements that influence our need to develop and implement a Community Engagement Strategy. Some of these are outlined below:

Localism Act 2011

This Act has created a variety of community rights which are intended to involve and empower local communities. It is a key strand of Government policy.

Local Government Act 1999

Requires local authorities to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement and achieve “best value” in the exercise of all functions. In particular, it contains the following two duties:

- **Duty of Best Value**

Described in the Best Value Statutory Guidance 2011, local authorities are required to consider overall value, including economic, environmental and social value, when reviewing service provision.

- **Duty to Consult**

Local authorities are under a Duty to Consult representatives of council tax payers, service users, and those with an interest. This should apply at all stages of the commissioning cycle, including when considering decommissioning of services.

Equality Act 2010

Brings together over 116 pieces of legislation into one single act to make sure everyone is treated fairly and equally. It contains the Equality Duty which requires the Council to consider all individuals when shaping policy and delivering services.

Cabinet Office Consultation Principles 2012

Provides guiding principles that Government departments and other public bodies should consider when planning and carrying out consultations. It places an emphasis on robust evidence, transparency and engaging with key groups earlier in the process.

East Sussex Compact

Sets out the aims and commitments for partnership working between the Public Sector and Voluntary and Community Sector in East Sussex.

Wealden District Council Constitution

Sets out how the Council will consider and respond to petitions and the role of Wealden District Councillors in encouraging community engagement.

Wealden Statement of Community Involvement (Planning)

As prescribed in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended), a local planning authority must prepare a Statement of Community Involvement to set out the Council's consultation procedures for the production of Local Development Documents and for commenting on planning applications.