



Community Engagement Strategy

Introduction

Councils are at the heart of local democracy and it is therefore essential for us to ensure that all sections of our local community have the opportunity to engage with us. The new way of assessing how effectively local partnerships are working together to deliver local people's priorities (Comprehensive Area Assessment), which commenced in April 2009, will focus on issues that are important to the local community and will require that citizens and communities have increased opportunities to hold public services to account.

This community engagement strategy seeks to build on the work already done by the Council, setting out what we mean by engagement, why we are committed to engaging our local communities and partners and how we plan to engage now and in the future.

1. What does the Community Engagement Strategy aim to achieve?

This Community Engagement Strategy aims to support strong, active and inclusive communities, who are informed and involved in decision-making and enable us to improve public services to enhance quality of life across East Cambridgeshire.

2. What is a Community?

Communities can mean different things to different people and there are many different groups that make up a living 'community'. Broadly speaking, there are two types of community that are commonly referred to as 'Communities of Place' and 'Communities of Interest'.

Communities of Place

The 'community' is defined by a geographical area with physical boundaries, for example a village or parish in East Cambridgeshire, or a housing estate. These communities may have similar concerns about issues that affect their local area.

Communities of Interest

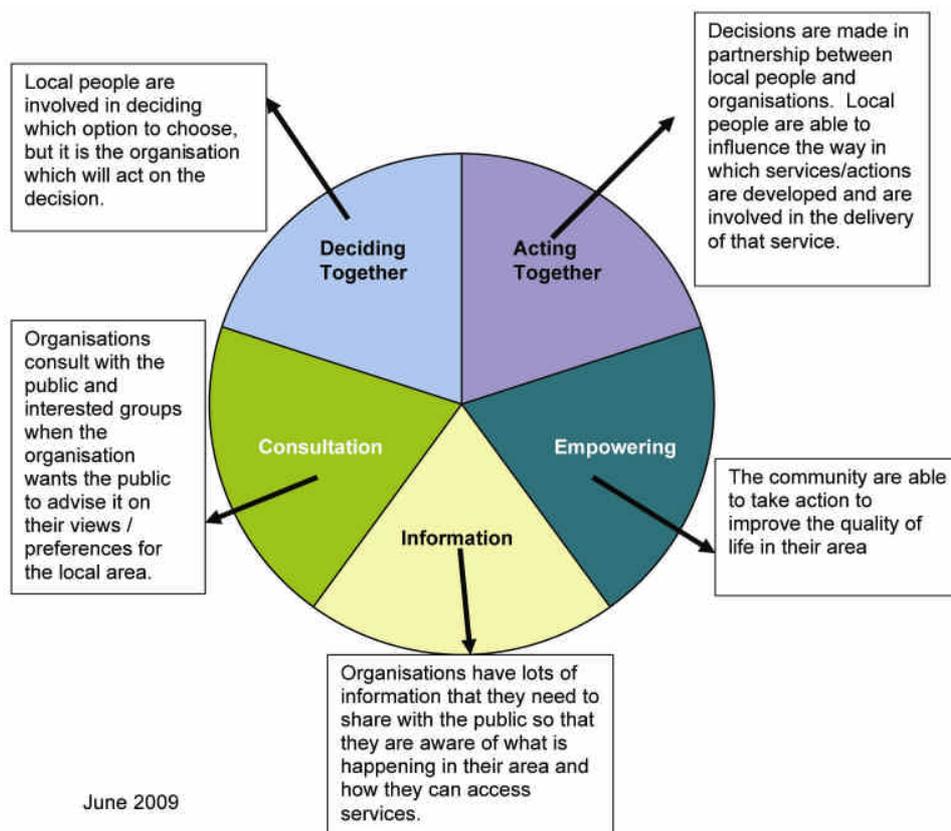
The 'community' is defined by a shared interest, experience or situation; examples include young people, disabled people and sports clubs. Additionally there are people who are concerned about specific issues for example the environment or crime and each of these communities of interest may require a different way to engaged or be engaged.

The Council recognises that each community will have different needs and wants that need to be balanced and priorities in the delivery of services and initiatives.

3. What is Community Engagement?

Community engagement can take many different forms. Each type of involvement is important to help the Council with its decision-making and service provision. It may not always be possible to reach consensus around issues, however greater involvement and participation will bring about better understanding of sometimes

complex issues. The Council uses a variety of community engagement methods and these range from active involvement (empowerment) to passive involvement (receiving information) depending on the activity and circumstances.



4. Why Community Engagement is important

Local experience and national evidence demonstrate that there will be benefits to both communities and the Council when engagement is undertaken, including:

- Strengthening the democratic legitimacy of government and the civic life of the community;
- More efficient and effective services that better reflect the needs of service users and have higher levels of customer satisfaction;
- A reduction in community inequalities;
- Safer and stronger communities, with a more attractive built environment that meets the people's needs;
- Greater local ownership of Council services;
- A better understanding of how and why local services need to change and develop;
- Improved local reputation;
- Greater job satisfaction for Council staff who see that the services they provide are meeting expressed local needs.

Engagement should occur in a systematic way that is integral to everyday working practices. Engagement should not be a one-off activity, but provide the fundamental basis of everything we do.

5. The national and local context

5.1 National policy context

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 introduced a duty on local authorities to involve, inform and consult representatives of local persons where it is appropriate and lawful to do so. The duty came into effect from April 2009.¹

The 2008 White Paper 'Communities in control: real people, real power' set out plans to introduce a duty on local authorities to promote democracy, as well as other proposals including:

- Schemes to support volunteering and community building.
- Improving information available to local citizens.
- The introduction of a new duty for local authorities to respond to petitions.
- Encouraging all local authorities to implement participatory budgeting by 2012.
- Enabling local authorities to provide modest incentives for voting.
- Support for more neighbourhood councils, particularly in urban areas, and neighbourhood management.
- Engaging more people in commissioning local goods and services.
- Enabling local people to have more of a say in the planning system, by providing more funding to support community engagement in planning and enabling planners to develop stronger skills in working with communities.
- Giving tenants a greater say through local compacts, choice based lettings and tenant co-operatives.
- Supporting the engagement of older and young people by the government.
- Raising the visibility of overview and scrutiny committees; making public officials more visible and accountable; and making it easier for local people to demand a local referendum on directly elected mayors.
- Making it easier for people to stand for election as a local councillor and balance work, carer and other commitments with duties as a councillor; giving backbench councillors more powers to make changes in their wards with discretionary local budgets they can target on local priorities; and plans to make it easier for local people to find information on ways they could be active in civic roles in their communities.
- Increasing the number of people helping to run or own local services and assets, such as community centres, parks, disused schools, shops or pubs.

The National Indicator set, introduced in 2008, includes measures to monitor the progress of local authorities and their partners in developing community engagement, for example,

- NI 2 Percentage of people who feel they belong to their neighbourhood
- NI 3 Civic participation in the local area
- NI 4 Percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality
- NI 6 Participation in regular volunteering
- NI 7 Environment for a thriving third sector
- NI 110 Young People's participation in positive activities
- NI 138 Satisfaction of people over 65 with both home and neighbourhood

¹ Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, 2007, paragraph 138.

The new Comprehensive Area Assessment includes an evaluation of the effectiveness of local authorities and their partners in developing community engagement.

5.2 Local Policies and Partnerships

East Cambridgeshire Strategic Partnership and Local Area Agreement

Community engagement is built into local partnership priorities:

The East Cambridgeshire Sustainable Community Strategy 2008-2011 describes the process of developing the document:

“From an initial list of the aims, the Strategy has evolved to reflect the feedback and input we have received from the community through two separate stages of consultation and a workshop. The resulting document sets out an ambitious shared vision for the future of East Cambridgeshire”.

The Cambridgeshire Local Area Agreement (LAA) 2008-2011 is a three-year delivery plan for the Cambridgeshire Vision (Countywide Sustainable Community Strategy). The Vision sets out the long-term priorities for Cambridgeshire that will promote the well being of local people, economy and environment. Three of the national indicators selected for the LAA directly relate to community engagement and as one of the partner organisations responsible for the delivery of the LAA, this firmly places community engagement as a priority for the Council.

National Indicator	Indicator Description ²	Baseline	2009/10 Target	2010/2011 Target
4	Percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality	31% (08/09)	-	34%
7	Environment for a thriving third sector	15.3% (tentative)	-	3.9% improvement
110	Young People’s participation in positive activities	76.2% (08/09)	80%	82%

The Cambridgeshire Compact

The Cambridgeshire Compact is a partnership agreement between statutory bodies and the voluntary and community sector, which has been designed to improve relationships and provide a framework within which to understand what to expect from each other.

The Compact undertakings include that statutory organisations will:

- Undertake appropriate consultation with the voluntary sector to ensure that as commissioners we are working towards consistency in commissioning, funding and monitoring practice.

² Definitions can be found at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/performanceframeworkpartnerships/nationalindicators/>

- Provide for quality in consulting the voluntary and community sector and others, including providing for a 12 weeks minimum consultation period wherever possible.
- Recognise the entitlement of voluntary and community groups to campaign within the law in order to advance their aims and objectives, and to comment on and challenge public sector policy, irrespective of any funding relationship that might exist.
- Recognise the breadth of knowledge and ideas within the voluntary and community sector and agree to value and utilise these resources when developing policy, strategy and service delivery.

Local factors

Community engagement needs to take into account key factors relevant to East Cambridgeshire:

Growth. East Cambridgeshire has the smallest population of the five districts within Cambridgeshire at 79,400 (County Council's 2008 mid-year estimate). However, the regional spatial strategy and local development framework envisage major growth in East Cambridgeshire in the next 10-15 years. The Council and its partners are already involving local people in planning for this growth. The delivery of the growth agenda will include involving new residents in developing and sustaining successful communities, which are likely to involve different approaches to community engagement to those currently used by the Council.

The population of the district. Whilst the district is relatively prosperous, there are differences across the area that need to be taken into account in the Council's approach to community engagement. Some parishes have 'pockets' of deprivation that exist as a result of the declining traditional industries, limited public transport access and rural isolation. Recently, due to job opportunities available in the farming and packaging industries locally, there has been an increase in migrant workers in the district. There is limited data to support the largely anecdotal evidence of the impact of this growth or the needs of these communities. Population projections show a growing proportion of older people in the district, which must also be taken into account when developing services for the future.

Working with Parish, Town and City Councils. East Cambridgeshire is essentially rural in nature with 35 parishes, including the market towns of Littleport and Soham and the cathedral City of Ely. Already the Council works with and supports parish councils, for example, in developing and delivering parish plans and through the recently established Neighbourhood Panels. Working with parish, town and the City councils is a key aspect of the Council's community engagement work.

Partnerships. The Council works with its partners through partnerships such as Cambridgeshire Together and the East Cambs Strategic Partnership to develop and deliver its community engagement objectives.

6. How can Community Engagement be delivered?

6.1 County Community Engagement Framework

Cambridgeshire Together (the partnership management board for the Local Area Agreement) propose the use of the Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA) Community Empowerment Framework as the county framework for community engagement. The core themes set out in the framework are as follows

- Stronger Communities;
- Vibrant Democracy;
- Better Services

If this approach is adopted, these themes would form the basis for partners' individual community engagement strategies, and participating partners will self-assess their community engagement work against the building blocks set out in the IDEA Framework.

6.2 Our Existing Policies and Strategies

Engagement activity is already included within many of the Councils policies and service plans.

The Equalities Framework for Local Government

The Council's progress in delivering equality of opportunity is assessed against the Equality Standard for Local Government. This is a five-level framework developed by the Employers Organisation for Local Government in consultation with the relevant equalities bodies to mainstream equalities into Council policy and practice at all levels.

Successful implementation of the standard will depend on a partnership between the council and the community and should involve:

Councillors

- To provide leadership and support
- To ensure resources are available
- To engage with the local community
- To provide a scrutiny role

Managers/Staff/Trade Unions

- To work towards speedy implementation
- To organise and participate in training
- To challenge existing cultures and traditions
- To engage with the community

Community/Voluntary Sector

- To work with the equality planning process
- To participate in scrutiny
- To extend knowledge of equality standard within the community.

The Standard represents a tool that can bring about change but this can only be achieved through an active engagement in the processes it sets out.

Local Development Framework

Production of the The Core Strategy Development Plan Document involved numerous stages of option testing and consultation. The document sets out a strategic framework to guide the growth of the district up to the year 2025 - setting out how much, where and when development will take place. It also contains a range of 'development control' policies against which planning applications will be assessed.

Consultation Policy

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 the consultation Policy is to improve the Council's services and to ensure that they meet the varied needs of different customers. The Council will consider when and how it is appropriate to consult with different audiences, including individual residents, partner organisations and parish councils.

Section 106 Investment Strategy

Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, relates to monies paid by developers to Local Planning Authorities in order to offset the costs of the external effects of development. The Council has developed a Section 106 Investment Strategy that establishes a sequential approach to the allocation and utilisation of funds. Applying the Section 106 Investment Strategy allows for considerable involvement of parish councils in the decision making process.

6.3 Our existing and future engagement activity

Ongoing Departmental Activity

The Council currently informs, consults, involves and empowers the public in a range of ways, for example:

- East Cambs Magazine
- Website
- Democratic Services
- Consultation on Planning Applications
- Youth participation
- Support for community-led plans
- Forums
- Satisfaction surveys
- Consultation on Masterplans³
- Neighbourhood Panels⁴.

³ The District Council is undertaking a series of studies to develop masterplans for the City of Ely, and the market towns of Soham and Littleport, to help manage the rapid population and housing growth that is taking place in these areas.

Masterplanning is an urban design technique for setting a clear strategy for the physical, economic and social transformation of a place. The approach involves carrying out intensive consultation to develop a strategic framework and implementation plan that sets out the way forward to enable the market towns to develop into sustainable communities. The Council is committed to an open public process, with everyone who cares about the towns working together to achieve consensus.

⁴ There are five Neighbourhood Panels in East Cambridgeshire serving the South area, the Soham and East area, the West area, the Littleport area and the Ely area.

Each Panel meets four times a year and is made up of Parish, District and County Councillors along with community representatives. This is an opportunity for the public to attend and raise their own local issues. At Panel meetings there is discussion about local concerns such as policing, health, housing and children and young people's issues. Decisions are made about which issues are most important to focus efforts on, although action is taken on ALL of the issues of concern raised by local residents.

More detailed engagement activity is activity is mapped by service area and will continue to be summarised annually. This process will identify actions and areas of development for the forthcoming year.

7. Who will deliver this strategy

We recognise that the council alone cannot achieve the ambitions in this strategy. Everyone has a part to play in making this Community Engagement Strategy work, particularly:

- all East Cambridgeshire residents
- elected members, who play a key role in delivering the aims in this strategy
- council staff – everyone is involved in community engagement activity in various forms
- community and voluntary sector organisations, who provide local services, work directly with local groups and organisations and with members of usually excluded groups and represent the views of their sectors
- partners, by working with other organisations and partnerships to make sure that services across the district (and County) complement each other.

Through the East Cambs Strategic Partnership, Cambridgeshire Together and other partnerships, we will work with other organisations, groups and individuals from the community, voluntary and private sectors to make sure that engagement activities influence the future direction of the district.

We also know that we need to work closely with communities to encourage effective community engagement and ensure that processes are flexible and can be tailored to different groups and individuals in different areas of the district. We understand that sometimes people are reluctant to get involved and we will work with other partners to ensure that community engagement is as straightforward as possible and targeted appropriately.

8. How we will measure our achievements

It is important for the Council to know whether it is achieving the aims of the Community Engagement Strategy. A variety of methods will be used to measure this, including:

- Using the Place Survey to measure achievement of five of our national indicator targets:
 - to increase the percentage of adults who feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds can get on well together
 - to increase the percentage of adults who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood
 - to increase civic participation in the local area
 - to increase the percentage of adults who feel that they can influence decisions affecting their local area
 - to increase overall/general satisfaction with the local area.
- Monitoring and reporting on the performance of this strategy and action plan annually through the Service Planning Process (specifically through the Policy and Performance team's service plan).

- Acting on feedback from our inspections and external assessments of performance.
- Participating in any countywide forums that provide the opportunity to share and learn from best practice.