

Community Engagement Strategy and Review

Cabinet Member Cllr Colin Slade
Responsible Officer Head of Communities and Governance

Reason for Report: To update Members on progress made with the Community Engagement Action Plan (2013-14) and to review the strategy and focus for 2014-15

RECOMMENDATION(S):

1. That the work taking place to engage with a wide range of Mid Devon residents and stakeholders is noted.
2. That Members approve the future focus for the Community Engagement Strategy including a targeted and proportionate approach to consultations.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: It supports the aims of the Corporate Plan 'empowering our communities' which is a priority for the Council and to ensure that our services are accessible and meet the needs of our community.

Financial Implications: Quality community engagement activities need to be budgeted into service plans.

Legal Implications: The Council has a 'Duty to Consult' (Local Government Act 1999) its residents, customers, and stakeholders under relevant legislation. Meaningful engagement will reduce disruptive legal challenge advised by the Best Value Statutory Guidance 2011.

Risk Assessment: Not engaging with residents in an appropriate way may result in services that do not meet the needs of residents, damage the reputation of the Council and may lead to legal challenge.

1.0 Introduction

Over the last couple of years, the Council has focused on providing good quality services against a backdrop of reducing budgets. The Council has a duty to consult and engage effectively with residents, partners, employees and other stakeholders when deciding about service changes, particularly at a time of service cuts. Effective engagement is essential in developing services that meet the needs of the residents they are designed to serve, and is an important part of performance review and commissioning.

Within the Council there are a number of good and innovative examples of consultation and community involvement. We wish to continue to engage and to work more closely with the communities we serve, our partners and other organisations (such as the voluntary sector, health, police, fire and other agencies) to develop services.

However, as a council we are now:

- Required to make significant savings and to make tough choices about service priorities.
- Look at the way services are delivered and ensure best value.
- Respond to the increasing demands of an ageing population

- Respond to the needs of areas of deprivation within Mid Devon.
- Respond to the effects of welfare reform and the impact it is having on low income families
- Seek to meet the challenges of changing national policy
- Respond to the calls for greater transparency and localism.

These changes re-enforce our need for greater and more meaningful public engagement to influence decision-making, service design and performance reviews. More public and community engagement should result in services which are more in line with need, which will reduce challenges to Council decisions.

2.0 What we have achieved in 2013-2014.

Over the last year, we have continued to improve how we engage with residents. The following outcomes have been achieved in order to develop our services based on the needs of our residents:

- Maintained the Citizens Panel - we consulted with the Panel three times this year with a number of services using the panel to undertake consultations and measure satisfaction levels. The panel is a cost effective way to regularly engage with residents and a valued resource.
- In order to ensure the Citizens Panel remains representative of the whole district, the panel has been completely renewed
- Involving children and young people – we have established a number of events with schools during Local Democracy Week, We formed a committee of young people to raise money for Tiverton Skate Park, which has now just been completed, using the participatory budgeting process.
- We have conducted extensive consultation on the Tiverton Eastern Urban Extension and Local Plan Revision.
- We have piloted new waste and recycling arrangement in preparation for service changes across the district

To co-ordinate and improve community engagement throughout the Council

- Methods of community engagement – ‘mystery shoppers’ have been introduced for our leisure centres. Services are beginning to use focus groups to understand issues in more depth. Services are identifying the need for consultations earlier and therefore able to plan / use the appropriate method for the topic and target audience from street to online surveys, focus groups and forums (e.g. for businesses, equality groups and landlords).
- The Council has also been committed to maintaining a range of communication channels from our website, facebook pages, twitter, youth forum, parish matters and Mid Devon Talk.
- A dedicated Consultation and Youth Involvement Officer is in place to support services conduct consultations and advise on best practice, including engaging with young people around antisocial behaviour and leisure provision.
- Specific webpages have been developed in order to be open and honest with residents as to how their views have influenced our decisions. URLs have been created for each page so staff can advertise these pages clearly in communications with the public.

- An engagement toolkit was created to assist officers to conduct effective and consistent activities
- The Council has an adopted Statement of Community Involvement to widen engagement in land-use planning processes by setting out when and how people have their say.
- The Community Development Team work with communities to deliver grassroots schemes and support communities to plan for their area. Community Development has had success setting up committees in order to apply for funding to address local need.

3.0 Community Engagement Action Plan 2014-15

Engaging Mid Devon residents is more important than ever for 2014-15. The Community Engagement Strategy and Action Plan 2014-15 ensure that we engage with communities in order to evidence and explain change. This is particularly important for the Council in the context of:

- Identifying budget savings and prioritising services, ensuring the level of service is satisfactory and fit for purpose.
- Encouraging resident 'buy in' through the appropriate level of participation using our resources wisely.

In order to meet the council's recent changes and provide services fit for our residents the strategy and action plan highlights that consultations are:

- **Proportionate:** the level of engagement needs to be proportionate to the impact of the decision / change. Therefore making the best use of our resources and residents time.
- **Targeted:** using the most appropriate method for the target group / community e.g. services should use the citizens panel to target residents as it is a cost effective method and statistically valid.
- **Influential:** consultations will only take place if the consultee is able to influence a decision unless legislation states otherwise.

Our vision for community engagement is:

- To enable local people and communities to take more control and to feel that they can make a real difference to the quality of life in the place where they live.
- Residents have a stronger voice in influencing services.
- Residents influence and improve services, based on a relationship of trust.
- That we feedback to residents regarding consultation results 'you said, we did' model
- The range of information available to elected members and senior managers is improved as a result of effective community engagement.

4.0 Summary

In summary the Community Engagement Strategy and Action Plan 2014-15 reflect the Council's need to:

- Engage with residents over service changes so we can explain the need for change and encourage 'buy in'.
- Involve residents in designing services to meet changing needs
- Improve the range of information available to residents
- Develop targeted, proportionate and influential engagement
- Conduct meaningful engagement that will reduce disruptive legal challenge

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Background Papers: Community Engagement Strategy 2013-16
Community Engagement Action Plan 2014-15

File Reference:

Circulation of the Report: Cllr Colin Slade
Amy Tregellas, Head of Communities and Governance

DRAFT



Community Engagement Strategy 2013 - 2016

Purpose:

Owner: Amy Dugard

Date: March 2013

Edition Number: 2.0

Review Frequency: Every three years

Next review date: March 2016

Consultation This document was sent out for consultation to the following:

Mid Devon Equality Forum

Consultation Champions

Scrutiny

Changes made regarding feedback throughout the year from Town and Parish Councils and residents.

Mid Devon District Council aims to:

“Ensure that our services are accessible and meet the needs of our community”

“Maximise the potential health and well-being of our communities”

MDDC Corporate Plan 2010-2015

1.0 Why do we need a Community Engagement Strategy?

Over the last few years the Council has focused on service improvement and providing value for money. We want to ensure our services are accessible and meet the needs of our community. To do this we need to improve how the Council consults and involves residents and other stakeholders in decision making, and to ensure their views are used to improve, develop and review our services. The Community Engagement Strategy sets out clear objectives and principles as to how the Council will engage with our community. The strategy is supported by an action plan which will help the Council achieve its aims.

The following documents support this overarching strategy:

- Community Engagement Action Plan
- Statement of Community Involvement - which lays down the principles for community involvement in the planning process
- Tenant Involvement Strategy
- Town and Parish Charter
- MDDC’s Consultation Tool Kit - a practical guide of methods for involving the community,
- The strategy has been developed to reflect the good practice set by the Voluntary Sector Compact for Devon

These together form Mid Devon’s agreed approach to community engagement.

1.1 What are our aims and objectives:

Overall aims are:

- a) to develop, improve and review our services based on the needs of our residents and stakeholders
- b) to improve the quality of community engagement so that residents and stakeholders influence decisions
- c) to use a targeted approach using the most appropriate method (where possible) and level of engagement in relation to the impact of the decision
- d) continue to co-ordinate engagement throughout the Council
- e) to create strong, active and inclusive communities

We have set the following objectives to help achieve our aims and deliver an effective and co-ordinated approach to community engagement.

- To make sure all community engagement is **meaningful** for the stakeholders involved by using the **relevant level of engagement**.
- To only consult residents when they can **influence a decision**.
- To **manage and co-ordinate** engagement activities and to reduce fatigue by ensuring consistent quality and identify partnership working.
- To make informed decisions based on **outcomes** from engagement activities.
- To make sure **good practice** is adopted throughout the Council.
- To ensure participants receive **feedback** from each engagement exercise informing them of the outcomes.
- To continue to develop and improve our services

2.0 Our values

All of our community engagement activities will respect the following values:

Access & Inclusion

- Ensure we identify the right people to involve and their preferred method

Clarity of Purpose

- We will be open and honest about what we can and cannot change and we will only consult when there is an opportunity for people to influence a decision and /or service.

Confidentiality

- Highlight confidentiality issues in community engagement activities and abide to the privacy statement.

Co-ordination & Partnership

- Co-ordinate and plan community engagement activities in advance to identify partnership working and avoid duplication and consultation fatigue.

Integrity

- All activities are voluntary; consideration should be made about the method, information, and questions to make sure they are appropriate for the targeted community group.
- The level of engagement will be proportionate to the impact.

Visibility

- Ensure stakeholders affected by decisions are aware of opportunities to make their views heard.
- We will state limitations and timescales which may impact the activity

3.0 Who is responsible for delivering this strategy?

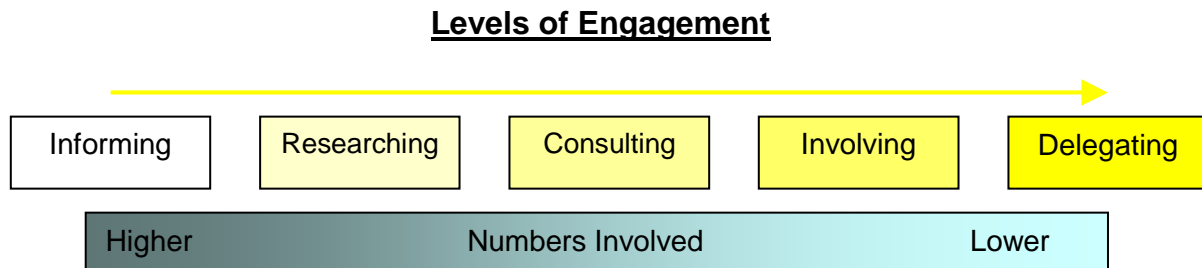
To make this strategy a reality we need help from all those with an interest in the Council:

- Mid Devon residents of all ages, ethnicity, religion and belief, sexual orientation and disability.
- Service users & council tax payers
- Community and voluntary sector groups
- Business sector
- Partners/other stakeholders
- Elected Members
- Council employees



4.0 How do we engage with our communities?

Community engagement provides people with opportunities to have a greater say in what happens in their community and to be more active in decision making. It is about empowering local communities and allowing them to be active in influencing decisions that affect them.



There are a number of levels of engagement ranging from informing to delegating. The issue or topic will determine which level of engagement needs to be used. Different communities will want to be involved at different times and in different ways and therefore engagement can be seen as a spectrum consisting of five key stages:

Informing (website/newsletter) - providing people with quality information to assist individuals understand the issues. It is an important element to support the other four stages.

Researching (questionnaires/focus groups) - gathering data about people's views and needs. The results are taken seriously and help with decision making.

Consulting (public meeting/consultation paper) is a two-way process where people will give their opinion or view on certain topics and the outcomes will feed into the decision making process, which will be reported back to the participants.

Involving (workshops/stakeholder dialogue) - at this stage communities / individuals have strong links with the Council and are together able to identify issues and create solutions giving the communities a shared responsibility for the decision (e.g. advisory group).

Delegating involves working in partnership, sharing resources and handing over power to groups and communities, allowing them to make decisions (e.g. a community group managing a facility).

As well as the council having a statutory responsibility to engage with residents we want to engage our community because it's the right thing to do in order to develop our services and provide value for money.

In order to provide quality community engagement and value for money, services will decide:

Accessibility: representatives should be engaged in a way that considers their needs. The method/level of engagement will depend on the local circumstances and audiences being targeted.

Proportionality: services should consider the resources required to engage appropriately. The level of engagement should be proportionate to the significance / impact of the issue, both for the Council and to the local people.

Services need to consider who might be affected by or interested in a particular issue / function to ensure the relevant level of engagement effectively reaches the relevant parts of the community. To do this services carry out an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA).

5.0 What can we do better and expect to see in the action plan?

- To be more open and answerable
- Improve partnership working between services and organisations
- Ensure results are used as widely as possible throughout the Council
- Use Equality Impact Assessments to involve diverse communities in the improvement of services
- Ensure services use the appropriate method for the target audience
- The level of engagement is proportionate to the impact / decision
- Ensure services only consult when a decision can be influenced
- To focus and create a strategy to engage our most deprived areas
- Demonstrate service satisfaction and value for money

6.0 Conclusion

We wish to engage and work with the community we serve at the most appropriate level in order to develop our services. We already have many good and innovative examples of engagement and involvement from informing residents through to delegating service delivery and partnership working. This strategy has outlined the Council's principles and approach to community engagement which will be assessed against the action plan in order to ensure the community have a greater say in decisions that affect them.

Glossary

A Compact for Devon – is an agreement between the statutory sector and the voluntary and community sector to improve the relationship for the benefit of each other and the communities they serve.

Communities - can be of place (people in a geographical area) or of interest, (people who share a particular experience, interest or characteristic), such as young people or disabled people. It's important to remember that people often belong to more than one community and communities are always diverse.

Consultation fatigue – caused by too much consultation and too little action and feedback.

Engagement - is about providing opportunities for local residents to influence the decisions made by Mid Devon District Council.

Hard to reach groups – Groups which don't normally take part in engagement activities and require different methods and efforts to engage with them.

Stakeholder – are people who have an interest in an organisation's affairs.

Statutory requirement - Under the Local Government Act 1999 the Council has a 'duty to consult' its residents, customers and stakeholders about the arrangements it is making to secure continuous improvements in the way services are delivered. This duty to consult is emphasised by later government white papers such as the 'Strong and prosperous communities 2006' and 'Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power 2008'. In 2011 the Best Value Statutory Guidance highlighted the importance of consulting when commissioning and decommissioning services. In 2012 the government released 'Consultation principles' for engaging stakeholders when developing policy. The Localism Bill gives communities power through 'community right to bid' and neighbourhood planning.

Community Engagement Action Plan 2014/15

Action	Targets	Timescales	Responsible officer
1. Engage with the public appropriately			
Engage with the public over service changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake three Citizen Panel Surveys per year 	April 2015	C&YI Officer
Involve young people in decision making and shaping the place they live	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan events for Local Democracy Week (LDW) 2015 Support community organisations undertake appropriate engagement with young people 	July 2015 April 2015	C&YI Officer C&YI Officer
Engage equality groups / voluntary sector appropriately in Council consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Services to carry out impact assessment on all budget cuts to identify which equality groups will be most affected and need to be consulted Organise community days for members following district council elections in 2015 	December 2014 June 2015	Service Managers C&YI Officer
Build relationships with the business sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate Mid Devon Business Forum Co-ordinate a Business Rates Consultative Group Facilitate a Landlord Forum 	Monthly March 2015 March 2015	Economic Dev Manager Council Tax Manager Private sector housing
Promote dialogue with parish and town councils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review parish charter Promote 'Parish Matters' as a means to inform and consult with parishes 	Monthly	Parish liaison officer
2. Promote good practice in consultation			
Widely publicise consultations and community engagement activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use a variety of communication channels e.g. Facebook, Mid Devon Talk, Newscentre, Twitter, to publicise current consultations Use WIS to inform members of consultations 		Service Managers
Provide feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the URL's for the webpages to advertise the results Place summaries of consultation activity on the website Use the 'you said, we did' model in MDT & Parish Matters 	Monthly Quarterly	Consultation Champions Consultation Champions / C&YI Officer
Ensure the correct method is used to target a specific audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update the methods of engagement toolkit and train consultation champions appropriately 	March 2015	C&YI Officer
Co-ordinate consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain the Consultation Calendar (outlook) Consultation champions to meet quarterly to identify joined up working and act as an advisory group. To identify consultations for the coming year in service plans 	Monthly Quarterly March 2015	C&YI Officer Consultation champions Service managers