



WEALDEN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

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Preface

This strategy sets out our framework to ensure effective engagement of stakeholders and individuals by the Council. Through community engagement Wealden District Council will enable people to put forward ideas, options and opinions to help shape decisions about local service priorities and improvements.

Vision

We will work towards a future where people in Wealden are involved, engaged, and empowered to seek to ensure that the Council meets their needs, and that people have the opportunity to be involved in decisions that affect them, thereby helping to improve the quality of life in Wealden.

Aim

To provide a framework for co-ordinated and effective engagement of stakeholders and individuals by the Council in its decision-making.

Strategic Objectives

- Engage more people in informing decisions that affect them
- Continually improve the effectiveness of our engagement activities
- Ensure that engagement results in evidence based decisions
- Meet legislative requirements

Tools to accompany the Wealden Community Engagement Strategy

- The supplementary information which is appended to this strategy, expands on the issues, evidence and rationale for the Wealden Community Engagement Strategy.
- An Action Plan will accompany the Strategy, which outlines actions to meet our aim and objectives.
- [The Action Plan will include] A requirement for each service plan to include a summary of engagement activity, results and how service policies and operational procedures have been modified in response. This service plan entry should demonstrate that proportionate, targeted and effective engagement techniques have been used. It will include the target groups engaged with, subjects and methods of engagement.
- An internal Consultation Diary is published on the Council's intranet.
- The Wealden Statement of Community Involvement highlights the Council's guiding principles to encourage people to become involved in the planning process.
- The Council's Constitution describes our mechanism for considering and responding to petitions.
- The Wealden webpage 'Have your say' lists the current consultations and details the results of the latest research and consultation.
- A toolkit will help build upon staff experience and ensure that data protection, human rights and equalities legislation is complied with. The consultation group will help share learning and best practice.

Resources

We will take account of the time and cost of engaging with the public, recognising that increasingly co-ordinated and effective engagement should bring efficiencies. With our limited resources there is a need to focus on effective engagement activities which can feed into the decision-making process.

Supplementary Information

Defining community engagement

The Community Empowerment Action Plan, drawn up by the Department for Communities and Local Government and Local Government Association, defines community engagement as the process whereby public bodies reach out to communities to create empowerment opportunities. Community empowerment is the giving of confidence, skills, and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for with them.

At Wealden this means people being involved in and being given the opportunity to influence decisions about their community. Engagement in the decision-making process can include customer satisfaction surveys, consultation, devolving decisions and supporting community action.

Successful engagement will result in the public and wider stakeholders being able to influence decisions which affect them.

Engagement activities can best be viewed as a hierarchy ranging from less involved to more involved methods, see figure below.

Understanding types of engagement

Source: Improvement Network¹



Communication often underpins engagement work by informing people of engagement activities and ensuring participants have the information about the issues that is necessary for informed, considered choices. An important part of engagement is feeding back to participants and demonstrating how their contribution has been considered in the decision-making process.

¹ Improvement Network (2007) [Understanding types of engagement](http://www.improvementnetwork.gov.uk/imp/core/page.do?pagelId=10167) Available at: <http://www.improvementnetwork.gov.uk/imp/core/page.do?pagelId=10167>

The Council's Communication Strategy is a separate document although both strategies support each other's aims and objectives.

Who does the Council engage with?

- Service users
- Key stakeholders
- People not currently using particular services
- Voluntary sector
- Statutory sector
- Private sector
- Community planning partnerships
- Residents
- Visitors to the district
- Council staff
- Its own Members

When choosing group(s) of people to target for engagement activity, selection differs according to what we need to find out. This is an important decision that affects the usefulness of the engagement exercise as well as the methods that are appropriate. This in turn affects the level of resources required. In all cases, we will aim to include people within the target population who might be harder to reach than others. We will work with the Equalities officer to determine best practice advice on including harder to reach groups to be detailed within the toolkit. We will seek to identify actions which will encourage more people to be engaged. In some cases people will themselves seek to engage with the Council. Councillors, the Local Strategic Partnerships at District and County-wide levels, the voluntary sector and our direct partner organisations are all important sources of information as well as being key stakeholders.

Why do we have a Community Engagement Strategy?

The Wealden Community Engagement Strategy and its aims and objectives build on the Leader's Purpose and Priorities report, which sets out the direction and priorities of the Council in the coming years.

The Leader's Purpose and Priorities report sets out three corporate objectives for Wealden District Council

- Putting People First
- Pride of Place, and
- Purpose through Partnership.

Putting People First is about local people and communities having more of a say in shaping Wealden and involving local people in local decisions. Listening to people is the best way of ensuring that local services meet local needs and aspirations.

People First is also about community leadership. Strong community leadership is increasingly important part of the role of a Councillor. Understanding local

people and getting closer to communities is vital to community leadership and our governance arrangements.

One of the priorities under People First is to be aware of and review our services to ensure that the needs of the young, older and vulnerable people in our community are met. It is also important that we take into account the increasing diversity of our customers and communities. Our action plan will identify mechanisms to make it easier for residents' views to be heard, and will strengthen existing mechanisms for engagement, for example focus groups or residents' panels.

Pride of Place encourages people to become involved so we are aware of people's views in planning the future of the district and promoting the services that are, and will be needed.

Purpose through Partnership supports working with partner authorities to improve the efficiency of local government. There may be advantages in linking resources so that partner public authorities can learn from existing research, gain access to particular communities and maximise opportunities for co-ordinated approaches. Sussex Police, in partnership with East and West Sussex County Councils is leading on a project to scope and deliver a sustainable resource that would allow partner authorities to share the benefits of respective consultation systems and databases. Wealden District Council supports this project.

The Wealden Community Engagement Strategy articulates our commitment to inform and listen to local residents, users of services and others. The strategy also commits us to engaging with the local community, reflecting the evolution of the political and social landscape and importance of effective engagement.

We will measure people's increased satisfaction with their ability to be involved and influence through a number of means specific to elements of the action plan and data collected through the national performance indicators.

What are the benefits of engagement activity?

The benefits of effective engagement activities are also identified in the Leader's Purpose and Priorities report.

Engagement of local people and communities can help us ensure that the services we provide are what people want and need. We can use the results of engagement activities to help make evidence-based decisions which inform our policies, priorities and strategies. The evidence generated is important to support our governance arrangements and our accountability for the decisions made. It can also be a useful source of evidence to demonstrate efficient service delivery, development and improvement.

There are also benefits to the local democratic process through involving local people more in decision-making. Engagement is needed to ensure local people

or groups do not have low expectations of the Council's performance and delivery, and equally that there are not unrealistic expectations generated.

Through effective engagement we can strengthen the community leadership role, as elected members become more aware and responsive to the views, needs and requirements of the community.

Statutory Duties and National Agenda

The Council has a statutory duty to consult on various matters affecting the community. The Government is increasingly focusing on effective consultation and empowering the public. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 introduces a new duty on best value authorities to involve local people in local services and policies. It also introduces the Councillor Call for Action to cover all local government services, empowering councillors to raise issues with overview and scrutiny committees. The Sustainable Communities Act 2007 aims to give local people more control over improving their community.

The draft Wealden Community Engagement Strategy provides a framework to enable the Council to respond to our priorities and meet relevant legislation in this area.

Role of Councillors

The Leader's report encourages councillors to take the most active leadership role at local level. This is supported by the Wealden Constitution which identifies a number of key roles for councillors:

- to contribute to the good governance of the area
- actively encourage community participation and citizen involvement in decision making, and
- effectively represent the interest of the ward and of individual constituents.

Other roles that councillors may undertake within the Council's engagement activity include

- acting as community or authority advocates (depending on the issue)
- transferring information from Council to communities
- providing two-way communication between organisations
- explaining the context and rules of what is possible
- alerting local people to proposals, issues and policies that will affect them and signpost services and process in the council and other partner organisations
- interpreting results and taking decisions on priorities
- communicating results back to consultees
- acting as a link with partner organisations for joint consultation

This strategy supports the role of councillors' in the Council's engagement activity.

Officer Group

In order to achieve the aim of the Wealden Community Engagement Strategy it is important that we build on the good consultation we undertake and the skills of many experienced staff that we have within the organisation. To achieve this a number of staff, from across the service areas, who are regularly involved in consultation activity have come together to form the Consultation Group. It is anticipated that this group will lead on co-ordinating engagement activity through the development of a toolkit and support network.

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