

Place and Resources Overview Committee

9 February 2023

Consultation and Engagement Policy and Protocol

For Recommendation to Cabinet

Portfolio Holder: Cllr J Haynes, Corporate Development and Transformation

Executive Director: A Dunn, Executive Director, Corporate Development

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

Dorset Council consults and engages on a wide range of topics and issues relating to the services it provides for its residents. Throughout 2022 we conducted a wide-ranging review of how the council consults and engages, seeking to re-design the approach to make it more effective and efficient. Above all, we want residents' voices to be heard and listened to across the organisation; their insight and feedback used to help shape services and policies.

One of the key actions from this review was to develop a new Consultation and Engagement Policy and Protocol for Dorset Council, to outline and embed consistent standards across the organisation.

Recommendation:

Members of the Place and Resources Overview Committee consider the proposed Consultation and Engagement Policy recommend it go forward to cabinet. Also recommend whether they consider the Protocol for decision on whether Dorset Council will adopt it as a baseline standard for all Consultations and Engagement activity delivered to Dorset Council residents with any minor adjustments to be authorised by the Portfolio Holder.

Reason for Recommendation:

Prior to Dorset Council there was an adopted Consultation and Engagement Policy from a sovereign council. As part of the harmonisation work, a transformation programme of the Consultation and Engagement function is being conducted, of which the policy and internal protocol are key elements to underpin the standards. It is deemed imperative there is a minimum set of standards and defined consistent process for how Dorset Council conducts consultations and engagement with our residents.

1. Background

1.1 Dorset Council consults and engages on a wide range of topics and issues relating to the services it provides for its residents. We are committed to listening to residents and communities when developing and shaping our services, we conduct formal and informal activities and have direct and indirect conversations on a regular basis. This process also facilitates building a level of consistency and trust between the council and our residents.

1.2 In mid-2021, the communication and engagement service identified a challenge to: **'Improve engagement with our external communities and demonstrate that their voice is being heard within the council, in ways which are consistent, efficient, and appropriate, defining the role of the central team and responsibilities of other teams.'**

1.3 This programme is being delivered as a council transformation project, and Agile methodology has been used throughout the process. The discovery period of work ran from autumn 2021 to spring 2022, and actively involved colleagues from all services across the council who deliver engagement, consultation and co-production activity.

1.4 The discovery phase included analysis of all recent engagement and consultation activity conducted by the council, a mix of surveys, interviews and discussion groups with colleagues, councillors and with residents, exploration of best practice by other councils, and advice from The Consultation Institute.

1.5 Key findings from discovery phase can be found in **Appendix 1**

1.5 One of the recommendations from the discovery stage was: Repositioned role of the central consultation & engagement team (two officers) to provide advice, guidance and maintain central systems in order to support all other colleagues; Facilitate colleagues across the council to be able to conduct high quality consultation and engagement activity themselves. This will include the development of a new policy, a new protocol and training materials for colleagues.

Appendix A

1.6 This paper is concerned with the Policy and Protocol development section of the overall transformation programme only.

1.7 The benefits to having an agreed policy and protocol for Dorset Council are:

- Improved customer experience – much clearer journey for residents to have their say, ongoing relationship and engagement with Dorset Council.
- Better use of data and insight to inform design and delivery of council services – all residents' voices being heard more loudly and acted upon.
- Improved trust in and satisfaction with Dorset Council among residents.
- Reduced risk of reputational damage, judicial review, etc. as a result of poorly conducted consultations.

2. Consultation and Engagement Policy

2.1 The scope of the policy is for all external consultation by Dorset Council, excluding consultation on Planning applications, the Local Plan and Traffic Regulation Orders. It will also exclude internal consultation within the organisation for example; in relation to employee pay and conditions is a separate process and led by Human Resources.

2.2 The proposed policy sets out a fundamental level of principles that consultation and engagement taking place throughout Dorset Council will adopt.

2.3 Guidance for staff on consultation policy, standards and activity is given in the Dorset Council Consultation Protocol document (3).

2.5 The draft Consultation and Engagement Policy is included in **Appendix 2**

2.6 Both the Policy and Protocol have been developed with advice from and using the latest guidance from The Consultation Institute (TCI) to meet the objectives of the transformation review.

3. Consultation and Engagement Protocol

3.1 The protocol has been developed to ensure consistent planning and implementation of consultation activity across all parts of Dorset Council. It sets out how Dorset Council will deliver consultation so that it is not only legally compliant, but of benefit to all involved in the process.

3.2 The draft Consultation and Engagement Protocol is included in **Appendix 3**

3.3 As part of the wider Consultation and Engagement transformation programme the protocol is also supported by a toolkit which provides practical

Appendix A

advice, templates and useful information for officers carrying out consultation and engagement activity. Online learning modules are being developed by the consultation and engagement team to train and support staff to be able plan and develop their own consultation and engagement activities.

4. Financial Implications

There is no financial implication for the policy and protocol.

Environmental Implications

A more efficient and effective council-wide approach to consultation and engagement will reduce unnecessary activity and wastage which would have a small impact on reducing the council's carbon emissions.

5. Well-being and Health Implications

More consistently delivered consultation and engagement with residents may contribute to improved well-being and health

6. Other Implications

None

7. Risk Assessment

- a. **HAVING CONSIDERED:** the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

8. Equalities Impact Assessment

An EqIA for the Consultation and Engagement Transformation Programme has been completed.

The aim of the transformation is that improved consultation and engagement approach across Dorset Council will provide benefits for people with protected characteristics, ensuring that their voice is better heard and used to inform service design and delivery. Currently people with most protected characteristics are under-represented as respondents to council consultation and engagement. We also know that residents living in south Dorset from lower income backgrounds have lower levels of trust in and satisfaction with Dorset Council.

Appendix A

9. **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Key findings from the Discovery phase of the review.

Appendix 2 - Draft Consultation and Engagement Policy

Appendix 3 - Draft Consultation and Engagement Protocol

10. **Background Papers**

None

Appendix 1

Key findings from discovery phase of the Consultation and Engagement Review:

- Most formal statutory consultations are conducted in line with legislation, including the Gunning Principles, and receive relatively high numbers of responses. However, certain groups in the population are over-represented among respondents (mainly well-educated, middle-income, white, older people) and others are under-represented. This means that results received are not always representative of the population and we are not reaching all groups in a way they would like to engage.
- Most consultation and engagement activity conducted by Dorset Council tends to use a traditional survey methodology, and there is a lack of more creative methods (and the tools and training to deliver this) which would better reach and engage certain audiences.
- There is some good work on service design, user testing and co-production taking place in certain pockets of the organisation – but it is not yet widespread.
- Too many surveys are conducted by Dorset Council, with services conducting their own activity in silos, not sharing results or learning from previous activity, and resulting in survey fatigue among residents.
- Different services procure and use different software for engagement, which can be confusing for residents and less cost effective. We need consistency in how we present our consultations and engagement: in the methods but also in branding, appearance, interfaces, etc., so people are familiar with it, how to access and use it.
- There is a lack of 'ongoing' ways for residents to engage with us – activity tends to be conducted as a one-off.
- Residents are sometimes engaged in a limited way that can mean they do not feel listened to and have poor understanding of council decision making. This negatively affects residents' trust in and satisfaction with the council. We need to do more to show what happens as a result of their feedback - 'you said, we did' - and we need to be clearer about what residents can and cannot influence through consultation and engagement.
- It can be confusing for residents to know how to engage with Dorset Council – there are lots of different surveys, but a lack of overall clarity about how or where to engage with the council. A single 'one stop shop' approach for consultation and engagement would be much clearer, simpler and more

Appendix A

accessible.

- Among some Dorset Council employees, there could be stronger understanding of consultation, engagement and co-production – terms are sometimes used interchangeably. We need to improve understanding of the processes, timescales, and the tools and support at colleagues' disposal.
- We need an improved comprehensive central record or library of all engagement and consultation activity across the council, and the findings from this activity.
- On occasion, there is insufficient time within projects to conduct consultation or engagement properly, end to end. This includes time to plan, develop stakeholder relationships, to take account of the findings, to embed EQIA (not just one point in process but throughout), and to feedback findings to respondents.
- There are opportunities with the new customer account and platform to use customer data to better target engagement activity at the right audiences.