

Corporate Policy Committee

Date of Meeting:	1 December 2022
Report Title:	Consultation and Engagement
Report of:	Jane Burns, Executive Director Corporate Services
Report Reference No:	CP/48/22-23
Ward(s) Affected:	All

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1.** The purpose of this report is to update Corporate Policy Committee on progress made to deliver a coordinated and collaborative approach to consultation and engagement, since the previous report considered in July 2022.
- 1.2.** The new approach, endorsed by the Committee, will support all of the aims and objectives in the Council's Corporate Plan 2021-25 but particularly supports two priorities within the "Open" aim, these are: to listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation and to promote and develop the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents.
- 1.3.** Officers have produced an operational 'toolkit' which is a clear guide to how the Council will undertake consultation and engagement.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1** Following the Committee's approval of co-ordinated and collaborative approach to consultation and engagement, a new toolkit has been developed by a cross council officer Task and Finish group. This has brought together expertise, advice and resources in one place. The aim of the toolkit is that there is one clear guide, which sits above directorate and service specialist resources, to driving greater consistency and information sharing within the council, increasing our external conversations and engagement activity and ultimately increasing participation and improving resident satisfaction.

- 2.2** The refreshed approach to Consultation and Engagement has considered three elements: development of a toolkit as an overarching “one Council” guidance resource, a consolidated programme of planned activity and development of a community of practice to regularly share insight and intelligence arising from consultation and engagement activities.
- 2.3** The July committee advised of the need to streamline and prioritise consultation and engagement activity to avoid “consultation fatigue”. The committee also requested that officers give consideration to the accessibility of consultation and engagement activities, particularly to those who lack IT skills, or who do not have devices or data to enable them to connect to the internet.
- 2.4** The July committee further advised to engage with members on this issue and Councillor Rhodes invited officers to use the Member Input Panel (MIP) for this purpose. The MIP gave the following feedback:
- Members were supportive of the development of stakeholder databases for consultation and engagement (with appropriate consents) and suggested that Residents Associations be added to the database.
 - Members advised that consultations should be publicised as much as possible, and supported the use of social media to publicise consultations
 - Members communicated that the process was not considered to be open and transparent by some residents i.e., the public’s views were not considered or did not make a difference. Officers confirmed that a section in the toolkit would emphasise the importance of feeding back to residents who had engaged with consultation and engagement activities so they could clearly see how their feedback had been considered.
 - The MIP also If there are too many frequent activities, residents may not clearly understand the relevance or impact of the issues being consulted upon which may mean they are reluctant to engage.
 - The MIP also discussed the challenge that the subject of a consultation was often about making economies, which immediately created a negative focus in residents’ minds. The challenge is to meaningfully engage and listen to dispel views that decisions are pre-determined.
 - Members advised that priority should be given to publicising examples of consultations where the public’s views had been taken on board and the Council had acted accordingly.
 - The MIP advised that the Council should work with targeted groups on changes which directly affected them and accommodate those who did not have access to a computer or the internet
- 2.5** The feedback from the July Corporate Policy Committee meeting and the Member Input Panel was shared with the cross council officer working group, and the toolkit was developed with consideration to the areas raised.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1.** To note the Cheshire East Council Consultation and Engagement toolkit (Appendix 1).
- 3.2.** To note the programme of consultation and engagement activities planned for the remainder of 2022/23 (Appendix 2).
- 3.3.** To note the development of the new Town and Parish Council network.

4. Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1.** The recommendations have been made to support progress against delivery of the Corporate Plan. This report particularly suggests activities that support implementation of the priorities to listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation and to promote and develop the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents.

5. Other Options Considered

- 5.1.** In terms of the new approach to Consultation and Engagement the committee could agree not to proceed and instead continue the status quo. The risk to this option is of duplication of resources in both resident and officer resource and disparate activity, which may be costly, inefficient and influence the reputation of the council.

6. Background

- 6.1.** In early 2022 a cross council officer working group was established to review the consultation and activities taking place across the council and to consider how these activities could be better aligned to achieve our corporate plan priorities.
- 6.2.** In July 2022, Corporate Policy Committee considered the initial findings of the officer working group and approved the new approach to Consultation and Engagement. The previous report detailed the outputs of the new approach as: (i) a Consultation and Engagement toolkit setting out a consistent process for different forms of consultation and engagement (ii) a new community of practice to share insight and intelligence to inform strategic developments, using the new Cheshire East Council Intelligence Network (CECIN), and (iii) a clear programme of consultation and engagement activity to support delivery of the Corporate Plan. The desired outcome of this work is that the resident voice is considered in all that we do, that residents and other stakeholders feel genuinely listened to, increased participation, there is equitable access to consultation and the ability to influence for all and that ultimately resident satisfaction levels with the council are increased.

- 6.3.** The new approach recommended includes both internal and external focus. Internally, officers want to have clearer guidance for consultation and engagement activity and to be able to share insight and intelligence across the council. Externally, the new approach also focuses on connecting and increasing activity, such as more engagement with Town and Parish councillors and sharing data obtained from stakeholder focus groups, such as the Voluntary and Faith sector networks, the Business Forums and intelligence gained from the Communities team.
- 6.4.** A Cheshire East Council Consultation and Engagement toolkit has been developed, with officers from across the Council, through a session with the Member Input Panel, and through a session with the Brighter Futures Champions. The toolkit has sought to bring together best practice from across the Council to provide an overview guide to undertaking consultation and engagement at Cheshire East Council.
- 6.5.** The toolkit will be available as a free-standing document for officers and members to access. It will also be developed into a Centranet (the Council's intranet) resource, so that access can be gained to resources and links within the toolkit. This will enable individual elements of the toolkit to be easily accessed and allows for updating of individual elements.
- 6.6.** The toolkit will be owned by the Council's Research and Consultation team who will administer a quarterly Consultation and Engagement group. The aim of the group will be to share best practice, to share intelligence and insight from consultations and engagement activity, and to identify opportunities for shared consultation and engagement activity.
- 6.7.** Information has been shared by Directorates, through the business planning process, to consolidate key consultation and engagement activities. The plan for the remainder of 2022/23 is at Appendix 2. The plan evidences consultation, engagement and survey activities. A key annual activity is engagement around the budget to inform the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. A report elsewhere on this agenda explains the process and timescale which will be necessary this year in view of national developments.
- 6.8.** As part of the refreshed approach to Consultation and Engagement, the need to strengthen relationships and communication channels with town and parish councils was identified. A new Town and Parish Council network has been established to enhance any existing arrangements that Members may have with their own local councils. The new engagement network (official name to be confirmed) will take place approximately every 6 weeks and will be chaired by the Chief Officer of Cheshire Association of Local Councils. The first session will take place on 30 November 2022. Details of the sessions for 2022/23 are at Appendix 3. The network aims to be a regular session to support consistent and effective communication and engagement between Cheshire East Council and Town and Parish Councils.

- 6.9.** The officer working group on Consultation and Engagement also identified that successful engagement in other local authority areas, included participatory approaches, sometimes referred to as “Citizens Assemblies” or “Citizens Panels”. In October 2022, the Council undertook a pilot project, partnering with a nonpartisan organisation called “Positive Money” to test a participatory approach in Cheshire East. Positive Money contributed £12,000 to this project.
- 6.10.** Cheshire East Council called this project the Cheshire East People’s Panel. The People’s Panel met over two weekends in October 2022, to consider the question “what can be done to make life more affordable for those most affected by the rising cost of living?”. 21 Cheshire East residents, selected to be as representative of the population as possible, heard from national and local speakers, participated in a series of deliberative workshops, and developed and voted on recommendations. The Panel have presented their draft recommendations to the Council, and the final report of recommendations is awaited. This report will be shared with members. The Council have committed to responding to the Panel by the end of January 2023. An evaluation of this participatory approach will be undertaken, with recommendations as to how this approach may be used to inform further development of consultation and engagement.

7. Consultation and Engagement

- 7.1.** Engagement on the new approach was undertaken with the Member Input Panel and the Brighter Futures Champions.
- 7.2.** The pilot of the Cheshire East People’s Panel, a participatory democracy approach, took place in October 2022, with the formal report due in December 2022.

8. Implications

8.1. Legal

Councils have a statutory requirement to consult residents in certain areas, for example for issues such as planning or redevelopment. Statutory consultations are bound by legal requirements. If there is a need to run a statutory consultation in line with legislation, there is a risk of judicial review.

8.2. Finance

Consultation and engagement activities are delivered within existing resource. The People’s Panel project received funding of £12,000 from Positive Money. Any additional financial implications would be subject to production of a business case and would be in line with the Medium-Term Financial strategy.

8.3. Policy

This report is in line with our Policy objectives as set out in the Council's Corporate Plan.

8.4. Equality

An aim of this report is to ensure that consultation and engagement activities are inclusive and accessible. Each specific planned consultation or engagement activity is informed by an Equality Impact Assessment.

8.5. Human Resources

It is possible that more dedicated consultation and engagement resource may be required to support our Corporate Plan aspirations, this will be considered within the restructure of Policy and Change.

8.6. Risk Management

Consultation and engagement activity can influence reputational risks to the council and the activity proposed is to increase resident satisfaction.

8.7. Rural Communities

If approved, the new approach to Consultation and Engagement will consider how to engage best with rural communities. A stakeholder list for rural community representatives has been established. The People's Panel included residents from rural communities under the methodology used to ensure that the Panel was representative.

8.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children

The new approach to Consultation and Engagement proposed supports a "One Council" approach. This includes the consultation and engagement channels that are led by Children's services with children, young people and families across the borough.

8.9. Public Health

The new approach supports public health priorities. The new council Cheshire East Council Intelligence Network (CECIN) has recently been established and is chaired by Public Health. Under the new approach it is proposed this will be the internal mechanism through which officers share insight and intelligence, promote collaborative working and reduce duplication. This will ensure that all findings inform our joint strategic needs assessments, and a promote a robust and comprehensive approach to addressing inequalities and to health and care transformation.

8.10. Climate Change

The new approach includes digital consultation and engagement channels, as preferred first options, to support reduction of our carbon footprint and to achieve environmental sustainability.

Access to Information	
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Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Draft Consultation and Engagement Toolkit Appendix 2 – Consultation and Engagement Programme 2022/23 Appendix 3 – Town and Parish Councils Network dates 2022/23
Background Papers:	Background paper 1- Report to 14 July 2022 Corporate Policy Committee, entitled “Approach to Consultation and Engagement” CP/6/22-23 Decision report template (cheshireeast.gov.uk)