Appendix A

Harlow Council

Community Engagement Strategy

2018/19 – 2020/21

Harlow Council

Working together for Harlow

Contents

Introduction

Harlow Council takes its responsibility for engaging with local people and businesses seriously and aims, wherever possible and practical, to take their views and opinions into consideration when making decisions about things that affect them.

The Council genuinely wants to ensure that people feel well informed about local issues; have the opportunity to get involved in and influence local decision-making and the ability to tell the Council what they think about its policies, procedures, service delivery and work with partner organisations. Above all, the Council wants to help build strong, involved and integrated communities where people can live happily alongside one another and enjoy all the benefits the town has to offer.

In addition, through effective engagement and marketing we can work together with residents, businesses and our partners to ensure that Harlow is recognised as a great place to live, work and visit; a great place for children to grow up being healthy and feeling safe and happy; an excellent place to do business where businesses will thrive and flourish and a place where people from all backgrounds can live happily together demonstrating community spirit and pride in Harlow.

The purpose of a Community Engagement Strategy is to build on good practices that already exist within the Council; plan a way forward for engaging with local people in the future and ultimately increase the number and diversity of people who engage with and work with the Council to help make Harlow the best place it can possibly be.

The strategy also acknowledges the Council's desire to work closely together with statutory, voluntary and community partners for the benefit of all local people and businesses.

The strategy is set out clearly in four sections

1. What is community engagement?

2. Why community engagement is important

3. Partnership working

4. How the Council intends to engage with local people in the future

The strategy links directly to the Council's Corporate Plan 2018/19 - 2020/21 in which the Council clearly states its goals for the next three years and how it intends to achieve these. Engaging with local people, businesses and partners will undoubtedly play a key role in the council's success in this respect.

The strategy also links to the Council's Tenant and Leaseholder Involvement Strategy which outlines how the Council will work together with tenants and resident leaseholders of Harlow Council to improve the services it delivers.

Further, the strategy is aligned to the findings and recommendations from extensive work undertaken by The Campaign Company in 2017/18 and will build on the work already undertaken for the Discover Harlow project to ensure Harlow is recognised for its outstanding location, energy, aspiration, achievement and wealth of opportunities.

Officers and Members have worked together to develop a Mission Statement that describes succinctly the Council's aim in respect of community engagement. This will be used when promoting the strategy and other community engagement resources such as posters and leaflets and will inform the various work streams that will naturally evolve as a result of delivery of the strategy.

Mission Statement

Community Engagement is the process by which Harlow Council aims to build strong, connected, involved and empowered communities with voices that will be heard and responded to as part of local decision-making.

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1. What is Community Engagement?

The term 'Community Engagement' can mean different things to different people and can take a number of different forms depending on what is hoped to be achieved. With this in mind the Council takes a varied and flexible approach to engaging with local people and recognises that there are many different types of community. For example **'Communities of Place'** are people living within a defined geographical area such as Church Langley or Staple Tye. **'Communities of Identity'** are people who share a particular experience or characteristic, such as young people, faith groups, older people, people with a disability, ethnic groups or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. **'Communities of Interest'** are people who share a particular interest such as skaters, athletes, musicians etc.

It is easy to think about community engagement as a set of steps ranging from providing information right up to passing decision-making responsibilities over to local people. Thus, engagement can include the provision of a whole range of information in various formats; undertaking research and consultation; encouraging, supporting and enabling participation and devolving decision-making powers where possible and appropriate.
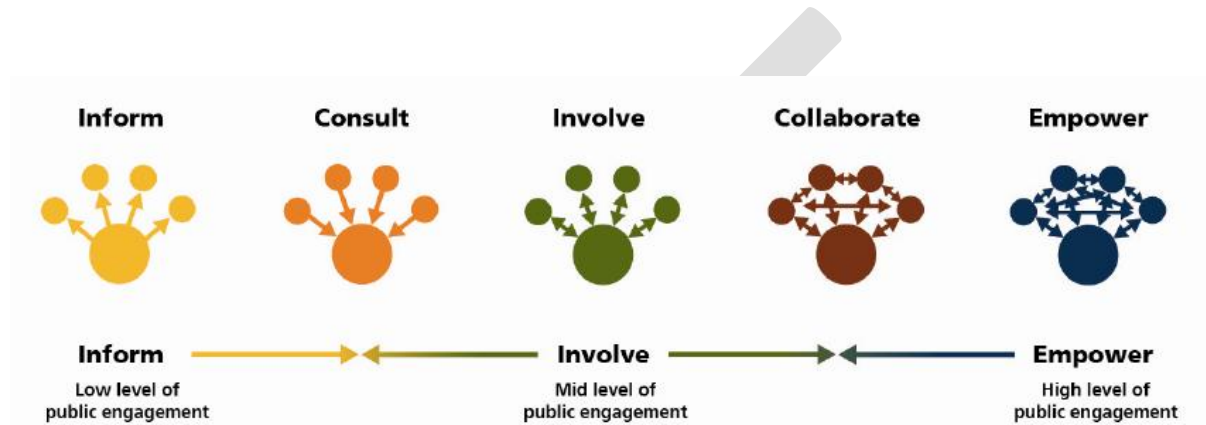
Effective community engagement is about making sure that residents are well informed about local services and issues that might affect them and the town more widely. Good engagement enables people to participate in lots of different ways to help make Harlow a better place in which to live, work and enjoy leisure opportunities. It also includes actively involving service users in the design and delivery of services wherever possible so that we can deliver quality services that meet the needs of local people.

The Council currently provides information on a whole range of subjects in a variety of different formats. As well as informing people about the different services and functions of the Council, it also sets out the challenges being faced; what it has achieved and the choices that it faces within the resources that it has available. It is

important for local people to understand what the Council can do as well as what it can't and the reasons for this.

However, engagement is not just about providing people with information. It is also about consulting them to gain an understanding of their views and opinions; conducting research to gather valuable information about local communities and by working together, in partnership, with local people to achieve a common aim.

There are different levels of engagement - from the simple provision of information through to direct involvement, collaborative working and ultimately the empowerment of local people to come together as strong, involved and influential communities.

Community engagement can take place in many different ways and the Council engages individuals and groups using the following formal and informal methods:

- Annual Staff Survey
- Biennial Landlord Survey
- Consultations – for example in relation to the Town Centre Area Action Plan and the Harlow and Gilston Town Project
- Council Committee meetings
- Councillor Surgeries
- Harlow Council Website
- Harlow Times Magazine
- Housing Focus Groups
- Housing Standards Panels and Board
- Online, using Facebook, Twitter and other appropriate social media sites
- Posters, leaflets, flyers etc.
- Procurement Exercises
- Public meetings, displays and market place opportunities
- Residents' Associations
- Resident Inspectors
- Surveys – online, face-to-face and postal
- Task and Finish Sub Groups
- Tenant and Leaseholder Involvement Strategy

- Tenant and Leaseholder Forums
- Ward Inspections
- Youth Council

Note: For the purposes of this strategy 'local people' are defined as people likely to be affected by, or particularly interested in, a particular function. As well as residents of Harlow this can include people who work or study in Harlow, visitors to Harlow, Harlow service users, third sector groups in Harlow and businesses operating in Harlow.

2. Why Community Engagement is important

Harlow's population has grown slightly over recent years and is projected to grow further. The town's population currently stands at 87,100 (2018). However, the Office for National Statistics projects Harlow's population to reach 94,800 by 2033

In 2017, 22.1% of the town's population was aged under-sixteen. This was slightly higher than the mean for all UK Local Authorities (18.5%).

Harlow is becoming a much more ethnically diverse town with latest statistics showing around 16% of Harlow's population being non White British.

Over recent years the town has also seen a significant increase in the number of families being placed in to Harlow by other Councils. This brings its own challenges in terms of increased demand on local support services and pressure on schools and health services but also in that the Council does not always know about or understand the community demographics in these areas and this could impact on opportunities for effective engagement going forward.

It is therefore important that the Council recognises growth in the diversity of its communities and prepares for the changes and challenges that this will undoubtedly bring. The Council needs and wants to be able to engage positively with people of all ages, from all social and ethnic backgrounds and intends that this strategy will inform and drive this work.

The Council wants to work with residents, statutory and non-statutory agencies and community and voluntary groups to strengthen relationships between people from different ethnic backgrounds and faiths and, in its role as community leader, will aim to bring communities together and improve relationships between different groups.

The Council also recognises the importance of young people's views and actively supports the work of Harlow Youth Council and the Harlow Youth Strategy Group to ensure that young people's views are heard and taken into consideration when decisions are made about things that affect them, including the commissioning of local services.

Engaging with local people helps the Council build a clearer understanding of local issues and needs from the perspective of those who are most affected by the

situation. Getting to know local communities better means that the Council can ensure the most appropriate methods are used to engage them effectively and successfully. Likewise, good engagement also means that local people gain a better understanding of the challenges being faced by the Council in seeking to meet their needs.

It is recognised that good community engagement can result in strong, vibrant and empowered communities. The Council aims to support local people to develop and enjoy such communities by further developing meaningful opportunities for dialogue with local people in good times and in difficult ones. We will listen to what local people have to say when making decisions about resources and services that affect them both directly and indirectly. In addition, we will work closely with local people to set up and run their own Residents' Associations to help build strong, connected and resilient communities.

Community engagement activity ranges from ensuring the availability of relevant information to suit the needs of local people through to undertaking research and conducting consultations and actively encouraging and supporting participation in decision-making processes.

Good community engagement can result in a range of benefits for individuals, businesses, communities and partners which can include any or all of the following outcomes.

- Assisting partners meet their requirement to carry out statutory consultation.

- Improved relationships with communities through open conversation and honest feedback. Increased public involvement in local decision-making and greater possibility of the public being able to influence local decisions.

- Involving residents in the delivery of public services to make sure their knowledge, experience and priorities help shape services so they are more responsive to local need.

- Encouraging more voluntary and community groups to become involved in planning and delivering local services so that they meet local demand.

- Helping people build strong, involved and empowered communities that are more resilient and self-sufficient and thus less reliant on the Council.

- Engaging more people in local democracy and decision-making about things that affect them.

> **Effective and successful engagement will assist the Council to achieve its top five priorities for 2018/19 to 2020/21.**
> - **More and Better Housing**
> - **Regeneration and a Thriving Economy**
> - **Wellbeing and Social Inclusion**
> - **A clean and Green Environment**
> - **Successful Children and Young People**

Positive engagement will be led by the Council's three guiding principles as set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 2018 - 2021

- **Being the Community Leader**
- **Sound Resource Management**
- **Equalities and Fairness**

3. Partnership working

For many years the approach to community engagement in Harlow has been that individual organisations have been responsible for their own engagement activity. The Council however recognises the benefits of partnership working and whenever possible and practical seeks to work in partnership to effectively engage and involve local people.

There are real benefits to be had in working together with partners to engage local people and economies of scale can be achieved where consultation activities can be joined up and undertaken simultaneously rather than duplicating engagement activity or events. Also, by sharing and combining information, agencies can gain a much clearer picture of local issues and the specific needs of the community.

It is important that there are opportunities for a range of different people to come together at various times, depending on the situation, to work together with the Council to ensure successful community engagement. We will seek to actively engage relevant people and partners on an ongoing basis and will include the following.

- Harlow residents and those defined as 'local people' (see page 4).

- Ward Councillors - as elected representatives of their communities.

- Voluntary and community groups - both individually and through local infrastructure organisations such as Rainbow Services.

- Smaller community groups such as Residents' Associations and local support groups etc.

- Private sector organisations, local businesses and social enterprises.

- Public service providers such as the County Council, the police, education, health, housing providers etc.

4. How the Council intends to engage with communities in the future

As mentioned on pages 3 and 4 of this strategy, the Council currently engages with local people in a variety of different ways although community engagement activities have not always been planned or joined up effectively across all services and audiences in the past.

The Council's communications channels and activities – including the Harlow Times magazine, website, various newsletters etc. and council events have been an important part in engaging with local people. Over recent years the Council has made more and better use of social media platforms and the Communications Team has undertaken both a customer services review and an extensive review in to the use of social media. These reviews highlighted key ways in which we can improve the way we engage with people via social media in the future to ensure we reach as wide an audience as possible.
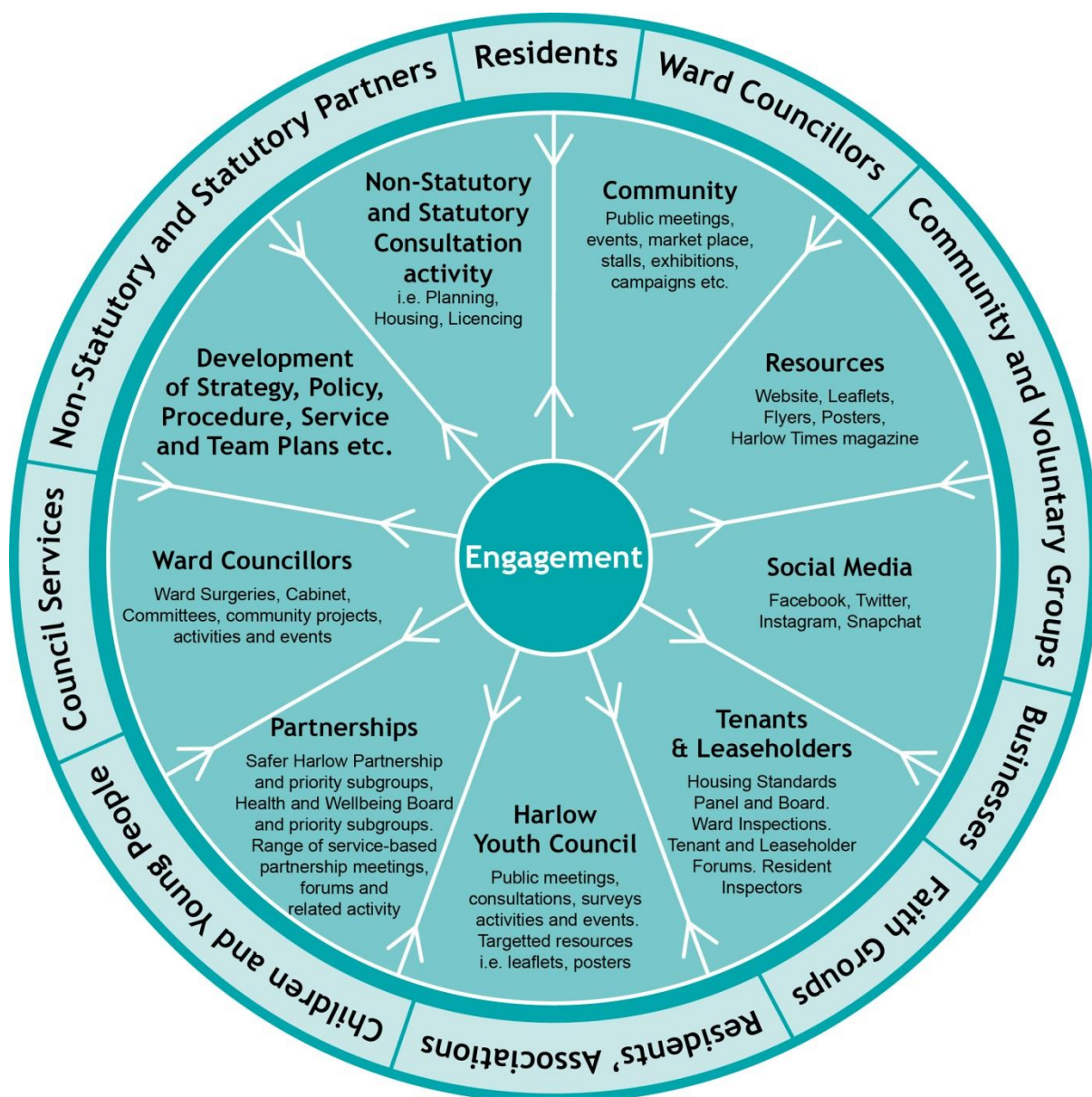
Due to the Council's efforts to increase the number of people accessing services via the website (for example to pay rent and Council Tax and book services such as green waste and bulky items for collection) local people are becoming much more familiar with the website and as a result there will continue to be a strong focus on developing the website as an important self-serve and community engagement tool.

The Council is already actively and effectively using social media to engage with a much wider audience across all ages and will continue to develop this area of engagement. In particular, social media will be used to target and engage young people about things that affect or interest them and the Council's Communications Team actively supports Harlow Youth Council to engage young people via social media.

However, we will continue to ensure that we offer a wide range of appropriate engagement opportunities that meet the needs of all local people across all age groups and social backgrounds. We will strive to ensure that we can actively engage people and groups that may be viewed as 'hard to reach' or are vulnerable through age or disability for example. We will regularly ask local people how they wish to engage with us and respond to their requirements positively whenever possible.

The diagram overleaf gives a visual representation of the many ways in which the Council engages with individuals, groups and partner agencies.

In delivering this strategy, the Council will work to increase the range of methods available for positive engagement. We will be open to new and innovative ways of engaging with local people to ensure their voices are heard and taken in to consideration as part of decision making processes.

Residents

Non-Statutory and Statutory Partners

Ward Councillors

Community and Voluntary Groups

Council Services

Businesses

Faith Groups

Children and Young People

Residents' Associations

Engagement

Non-Statutory and Statutory Consultation activity
i.e. Planning, Housing, Licencing

Community
Public meetings, events, market place, stalls, exhibitions, campaigns etc.

Development of Strategy, Policy, Procedure, Service and Team Plans etc.

Resources
Website, Leaflets, Flyers, Posters, Harlow Times magazine

Ward Councillors
Ward Surgeries, Cabinet, Committees, community projects, activities and events

Social Media
Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat

Partnerships
Safer Harlow Partnership and priority subgroups, Health and Wellbeing Board and priority subgroups. Range of service-based partnership meetings, forums and related activity

Tenants & Leaseholders
Housing Standards Panel and Board. Ward Inspections. Tenant and Leaseholder Forums. Resident Inspectors

Harlow Youth Council
Public meetings, consultations, surveys activities and events. Targetted resources i.e. leaflets, posters

Principles

The Council's approach to future engagement with local people will include the following.

- Having clearly defined objectives for engagement and communicating clearly and openly about decision-making processes and resulting actions.

- An openness to considering and developing new ways to deliver services.

- Seeking to reach those communities and individuals not yet engaged i.e. hard to reach and marginalised groups.

- Genuinely listening to the views and opinions of local people and taking these into consideration when making decisions that affect them.

- Being open and honest with local people when their views and opinions cannot be acted upon and the reasons for this.

- Sharing information (where appropriate) and expertise and pooling partner resources to maximise engagement and reduce 'engagement fatigue' and duplication for communities, businesses and individuals.

- Seeking to identify new and innovative ways to engage local people in timely and creative ways in order to ensure maximum participation.

- Recognising and valuing existing community engagement methods and working to make these more responsive and effective.

5. Future engagement – the Council's commitment.

The Council will undertake the following actions in order to support robust delivery of this strategy and ensure effective community engagement in the future.

- Ensure an organisational culture where all Councillors and staff recognise and value the importance of effective engagement and consultation

- Observe good practice and available guidance, for example the 'New Conversations – LGA guide to engagement' and the Harlow specific tool 'Embedding Community Engagement Through Change'

- Develop and promote a Community Engagement Toolkit that will be understood and delivered across all council services to ensure good practice, effective planning and robust monitoring and evaluation of community engagement activity.

- Be clear about what it hopes to achieve from consultation and not undertake consultation where it is clear that public opinion will not change outcomes - for example when statutory duties must be met

- Continue to use a variety of community engagement methods to consult and engage with local people – using the most appropriate approach depending on the situation

- Continue to develop the Council's website as an important, informative and useful engagement tool with the intention that more services become available to the public through self-serve platforms online and through mobile devices

- Ensure people have a choice about the way in which they communicate with the Council, for example by letter, email, telephone and also through social media platforms and that the Council offers a range of appropriate methods for sharing information and communicating with local people. This includes the availability of information in different languages and large print

- Ensure that community engagement activity is aligned to the work of the Communications Team; is well planned and co-ordinated across the Council and that feedback from local people is shared appropriately internally as well as being shared with external partners whilst taking in to consideration issues of confidentiality and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) .

- Undertake all statutory engagement effectively, ensuring residents have sufficient time to respond.

- Take an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach to working with communities. This approach focusses on identifying the strengths, skills and experiences of people within local communities as well as other assets such as community buildings and local community and voluntary groups. Asset Based Community Development draws upon existing community strengths to build stronger, more sustainable communities for the future.

- Make available the option for up to three 'Community Call' public meetings a year. This approach gives local people the opportunity to request a public meeting with Councillors and officers to discuss an identified issue and work together to develop a community based solution.

- Continuously seek to identify new and innovative ways to actively and successfully engage local people on an going basis and regularly liaise with other local authorities to identify new areas of good practice

- Actively encourage tenants and resident leaseholders of Harlow Council to participate in forums, become members of the Housing Standards Panels and Board and be involved in other housing related involvement activities to reflect the increasing diversity of Harlow.

- Work in partnership to develop initiatives and activities to involve people in improving their neighbourhoods

- Support existing Residents' Associations and the development of new ones in order to bring communities together; enhance community cohesion and assist residents to take interest in and greater sense of responsibility for their own areas

- Work in partnership with the community and voluntary sector to support them to play a key role in influencing and delivering services

6. Measuring success

The Council will develop a Community Engagement Action Plan to support delivery of this strategy and embed Community Engagement within its working practices across all service areas. Success will be measured against performance targets and desired outcomes contained in the Action Plan.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>