



Harlow Council
Community Engagement Strategy
2022/23 – 2024/25

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Listening to our communities to deliver on residents' priorities at every step



I understand that it is sometimes difficult to know the best way to get an answer from the council when something needs attention. That must change, so the council is going to take action and improve the way it interacts with residents by taking a fresh approach to community engagement.

Residents have told me that they have often felt that the council could be more proactive and engage in a two-way conversation to get things done. There is recognition that more needs to be done to be responsive, that is why this strategy is important in setting out the future direction for wider community engagement.

This strategy aims to capture the critical steps required to enhance the approach taken to date. The focus will be on using a range of communication tools and outreach opportunities to interact with residents on a more regular basis.

Technology does have a purpose and digital tools, including social media, will be used to support the new approach to strengthen community engagement, but that form of communication only has a certain reach. To make sure this new approach is inclusive; a review of the council's communications will be undertaken in tandem with the implementation of this strategy to agree what additional forms of engagement should be prioritised to reach the majority of residents. Recognising that we have a higher than average ageing population in the town is an important consideration for this strategy, which is why the outreach work the council plans to deliver in future will aim to be more responsive to the needs of older generations in the town.

This strategy places an emphasis on connecting with and celebrating different cultural traditions, which is something the council is committed to furthering. Ensuring nobody is excluded means disabled people and vulnerable groups will be a priority.

To complement the aims and objectives of the council's corporate strategy, there is a dedicated section for key engagement opportunities over the next few years that, in policy terms, will be embarked upon. Regeneration, community safety, confronting climate change, estate renewal and the town's economic recovery from the pandemic are all priorities that the council is keen to engage with the community on.

It is my ambition that this strategy delivers a step change in the way the council communicates with residents, so that a better understanding can be developed about what matters most to the communities that make up our expanding town.

If the council can make further improvements in the way it engages with the community at large, it will be better placed to seize on opportunities and be able to be more proactive in taking a leadership role that strengthens trust in local government as a vehicle to deliver positive change.

Joel Charles,
Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Business and Community Resilience

1. 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 participate in and influence local decision-making and have access to a range of methods through which they can tell the council what they think about its policies, procedures, service delivery and partnership working. Above all, the council wants to help build resilient, involved and integrated communities where people from all backgrounds have equal access to opportunities to ensure no one is left behind and everyone has the chance to thrive, achieve, succeed and enjoy all the benefits the town has to offer.

Through effective engagement we want to work with residents, businesses and the community and voluntary sector to improve relationships with the council; increase opportunities for meaningful two way conversations that are built on honesty, openness and trust and ensure that the council better understands local issues and identified need within the community so that we can respond in the most appropriate and helpful way. We want local people to feel heard and valued and feel a tangible sense of change in the way in which we engage and consult them about things that affect them personally or the town more widely.

The purpose of our Community Engagement Strategy is to build on good practices that already exist within the council and in our approach to partnership working; to plan a way forward to strengthen engagement with local people and businesses in the future and ultimately increase the number and diversity of people who engage with the council to help make Harlow the best place it can be.

A key element of this strategy will be to develop and implement new and innovative ways of engaging vulnerable people and groups with unmet needs to ensure their voices are heard and taken in to consideration when we are designing and delivering our services and making decisions about things that affect them.

This strategy sets out our intentions for future engagement activity and will act as a framework for inclusive engagement to ensure everyone has the opportunity to feel and be involved, included and listened to.

This strategy links directly to the council's Corporate Strategy 2021 - 2023, a three-year plan that focuses on four key themes:

- **Economic growth**
- **Social cohesion**
- **Safeguarding the environment**
- **Being an efficient council**

Engaging with local people, businesses, the community and voluntary sector and other partners will play an important role in successful delivery of the council's corporate priorities, and we will ensure that all internal and external communication activity is targeted to reflect the ambitions of the Corporate Strategy.

This strategy also links to the council's Tenant and Leaseholder Involvement and Engagement Strategy which outlines how the Council will work together with tenants and resident leaseholders of Harlow Council to improve the services it delivers. There is rich diversity within our communities with a mix of tenants, leaseholders and owner-occupiers and we want to involve as many people as possible from all social and financial backgrounds in order to better understand their concerns about the areas and accommodation in which they live. There is a legislative expectation that tenant and leaseholder involvement is embedded in our work and the service has a dedicated budget and full time member of staff (Community Engagement Officer) to lead on this important area of engagement.

Further, this strategy will link to the council's new Climate Change Strategy which will set out how we will work towards positive climate change to achieve our net zero carbon emissions pledge by 2040. As part of this very important work the council wants to engage with residents and businesses to develop a clear understanding of what climate change means for the town and a shared commitment to the action that we need to take together on this journey.

The council has recently developed a new Community Resilience Strategy which sets out how the council will work with partner agencies and local people to support the town's financial and social recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. How we engage people in this recovery work, particularly those that are vulnerable or have unmet needs, will be critical to the town's journey to recovery and will help to build strong, resilient communities that can live safely, healthily and successfully with the ongoing effects of the pandemic for however long it may take. The council will work hard to find new, innovative ways to engage local people in this work and wherever possible involve them in identifying ongoing support needs and decision making about service design and delivery to meet identified need.

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.

This strategy is set out in five sections:

- **The importance of effective engagement**
- **Partnership working**
- **Key engagement opportunities**
- **Future ways of working**
- **Measuring success**

Working together to achieve our goals

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 and opinions are heard and taken in to consideration as part of service design and delivery and local decision making processes.

By working in partnership with residents, businesses and the community and voluntary sector and actively seeking ways to identify and engage vulnerable and minority groups, the council aims to achieve the following outcomes:

<h3>Outcome 1</h3>  <p>Involved and empowered communities that can lead the way in making Harlow a great place to live, work and visit.</p>	<h3>Outcome 2</h3> <p>Well informed residents who feel they have the opportunity and power to influence decision making on issues that affect them directly and their town more widely.</p> 
<h3>Outcome 3</h3> <p>Delivery of focused and purposeful activity that involves both individuals and communities that will increase opportunity and quality of life for all.</p> 	<h3>Outcome 4</h3> <p>Residents needs and priorities continuously being seen, recognised and acted on – this focus will be put front and centre of council business.</p> 
<h3>Outcome 5</h3>  <p>Residents across all sections of the community being able to access the right support, at the right time, in the right place to ensure identified need is met consistently and everyone has the opportunity to thrive and achieve both socially and economically.</p>	<h3>Enabling Objective</h3> <p>An organisational-wide approach to proactive community engagement where it is the responsibility of every councillor and officer to encourage the involvement of communities effectively in everything the council does.</p>

2. The importance of effective 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.

Effective engagement ensures that local people are well informed about services and issues that might affect them personally and the town more widely.

It enables people to participate in lots of different ways to help make Harlow a better place in which to live, work, visit and enjoy leisure opportunities. It also includes a commitment to co-production – the process of 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 and we aim to ensure that information and engagement opportunities are available in a variety of different formats to ensure our communications style is aligned to the ever increasing diversity of our communities.

However, engagement is not just about providing people with information. It is also about asking questions and listening to people's view and opinions to inform our decision making; conducting research to gather valuable information about local communities and by working together, in partnership, with local people to achieve a common aim.

Harlow's population has grown over recent years and is projected to grow further not least with the new Harlow and Gilston Garden Town (HGGT) development which will see new neighbourhoods being established to the east, west and south of Harlow, along with seven new villages to the north providing around 23,000 new homes to cater for all including those most in need. There will be a major investment in transport, jobs and community infrastructure to support new and existing residents in the Harlow area and we are keen to work with the HGGT team, residents and businesses at every stage to hear their thoughts and ideas about this major new development and promote Harlow as a place where business will seek to locate and invest.

In 2020 the total population of Harlow was 87,280 – an increase of 5% (3,482) since 2013. Of that population:

- 21,869 (25.0%) were age 0 – 17yrs
- 51,995 (59.6%) were age 18 – 64yrs
- 13,416 (15.4%) were age 65yrs and over

In Harlow in 2011 the percentage of the population who identified themselves as white was 89.1%, the percentage who identified as Asian or Asian/British was 4.6%, the percentage who identified as black or black British was 3.8%, those who identified as mixed race made up 2.1% per cent of the population and those who identified as other ethnic group made up 0.5% per cent of the population. The next Census outcomes due this year will update our understanding of the ethnicity of Harlow's population.

We know that our residents are living longer and that our communities are becoming more diverse and it is important that we find new ways of engaging with residents across all ages and social and financial backgrounds so that everyone has the opportunity to have their voices heard and no one feels excluded or left behind.

Over recent years the town has also seen a significant increase in the number of families being placed by other councils in to privately owned accommodation in Harlow and we do not always know about or understand the community demographics in these areas. We are working hard with our partners to develop effective engagement opportunities in these areas.

It is 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 financial, social and ethnic backgrounds and intends that this strategy will inform and drive this work.

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 children and young people's services.

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 and strengthening meaningful opportunities for dialogue with local people, in particular those from groups with unmet needs. We will listen to what local people and businesses 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. We will also work with the business community using our presence at Business Forums and the Harlow Chamber of Commerce and our influence as the community leader to drive social and economic prosperity, promoting Harlow as an excellent location for business location and investment.

The council recognises that it needs to review and improve the way in which it views and undertakes engagement activity with businesses and communities and the importance of effective engagement in delivering services across all council functions. As a result of a renewed and strengthened approach to community engagement we aim to improve working practices to ensure our services can be even more responsive to the needs of residents and businesses and achieve overall increased levels of engagement.

Good community engagement enables the council to demonstrate the value it places on the quality of life of residents and better understand the needs of businesses – both of which underpin Harlow as an attractive place to live, invest in or relocate to. It also helps the council to understand what ‘Levelling Up’ really means for our community and enables the council to engage with the Government agenda and advocate for those needs.

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.
- Increased public involvement in local decision-making and greater possibility of the public being able to influence local decisions leading to improved relationships with communities.
- Co-design of services by involving residents in the development and delivery of public services to make sure their knowledge, experience and priorities help shape services so they are more responsive to local need.
- More community and voluntary groups becoming involved in planning and delivering local services to meet ever changing local demand.
- Strong, involved and cohesive communities that are more resilient and self-sufficient and thus less reliant on the council and other support services.
- A greater diversity of people involved in local democracy and decision-making about things that affect them.

3. Partnership working

The council 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 widen the networks within which we work and actively engage relevant people and partners on an ongoing basis.

We will include the following:

- Harlow residents of all ages and backgrounds 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.
- Smaller community groups such as Residents' Associations and local support groups etc.
- Private sector organisations, social enterprises and local businesses including engagement through the Harlow Chamber of Commerce.
- Public service providers such as Essex County Council, police, education, health, housing providers etc.
- People from minority or hard to reach groups and groups with unmet identified need.

The diagram below gives a visual representation of the many ways in which the council currently engages with individuals, groups and partner agencies and we are committed to strengthening this work to ensure increased levels of inclusive engagement throughout the lifetime of this strategy.

An inclusive community engagement approach recognises that everyone has a role to play in public engagement. Our approach will provide all people from all backgrounds with opportunities to participate by reducing barriers, creating connections and engaging in meaningful and supportive ways.



4. Key engagement opportunities

As the council begins to implement the new Corporate Strategy and roll out the Community Resilience Strategy to support recovery from COVID-19, there will be a wide range of opportunities to engage with local people to help us identify what our communities need and how we can work with others to develop the most appropriate response. Our inclusive engagement approach will ensure that no one is left behind or has less opportunity to be engaged and involved than others.

The table below gives just some examples of key areas of engagement that will be undertaken to support delivery of the council's Corporate Strategy. New key actions will be added to our Community Engagement Action Plan which will be continuously fluid and able to pivot in order to respond to changing local need over the lifetime of this strategy.

Opportunity	Engagement activity	Desired outcome
Supporting the climate change agenda	Deliver a social media awareness raising campaign and one-off community engagement events and activities.	Residents, businesses and stakeholders understand the importance of working together to reduce Harlow's carbon footprint and know how they can contribute to the local and global climate change agenda.
Improving community safety	Undertake a perception of crime survey to inform development of a new Community Safety Strategy.	To better understand people's perception of crime locally and what helps people feel and be safe in their own homes, businesses and the wider community to inform Community Safety Team and Safer Harlow Partnership priorities.
Building resilient and cohesive communities	Deliver a range of outreach engagement activity including meetings, forums, pop up events, surveys and questionnaires etc. to help identify local issues.	To achieve better understanding of ward specific and town wide issues and identify opportunities to work together with residents to create and deliver community led solutions.

Opportunity	Engagement activity	Desired outcome
Regeneration and estate renewal	Public exhibitions and consultation on planned and future regeneration aspirations. To include a range of targeted workshops, presentations, drop in events, social media posts and campaigns, website and newsletters.	Residents, businesses, community groups and stakeholders have the opportunity to be involved in and influence the town's regeneration programme.
Review of the Tenant and Leaseholder Involvement and Engagement Strategy	Actively involve tenants and leaseholders in the development of a new/refreshed strategy document to ensure their views and opinions are included where possible. The current strategy expires in 2023.	The strategy reflects tenant and leaseholder input and clearly explains how involvement and empowerment will be delivered by Housing Services and the council.
Support social and economic recovery from COVID-19	Implementation of the council's new Community Resilience Strategy shall include consultation and collaborative working with residents, businesses, community and voluntary groups and wider partners. Particular emphasis will be on strengthening engagement with vulnerable groups and groups with unmet identified need.	<p>Identification and better understanding of local need resulting from the pandemic and the ability to better support residents and businesses to recover and thrive both socially and economically.</p> <p>Reduction in loneliness and social isolation and support for communities to be more cohesive, self-sufficient and resilient.</p>

Opportunity	Engagement activity	Desired outcome
<p>Improve communications</p>	<p>Undertake a review of the council's approach to communicating and consulting with residents, businesses, community and voluntary groups – incorporating actions within the council's Equality Action Plan, and to include use of current and potential communication channels.</p> <p>Promote the council's Consultation web page more widely.</p>	<p>To have confidence that the council is equipped to communicate with all communities within Harlow through a variety of mediums which could include audio, braille, large print, easy read and other language options where required.</p> <p>Increase response rates to public consultations.</p>

<p>Harlow and Gilston Garden Town</p>	<p>Deliver a wide range of engagement and consultation opportunities at relevant stages throughout lifetime of the project.</p>	<p>Residents, businesses, community and voluntary groups and stakeholders have the opportunity to be informed about progress; have their views and opinions heard and the ability to influence decision making in connection with development of the project.</p>
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<p>Support the Levelling Up agenda</p>	<p>Public consultation on project proposals for the town centre including pop up and drop in exhibitions, social media campaigns and newsletters.</p>	<p>Residents, community groups and stakeholders have the opportunity to understand, be involved in and influence the development of project proposals.</p>
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Opportunity	Engagement activity	Desired outcome
<p>Support the economic growth of the town</p>	<p>Consultation and engagement with business and employers will inform the development of the council's Economic Development Strategy.</p> <p>Harlow Business Forum will continue, enabling the council to work with the Chamber to ensure business needs and issues are understood.</p> <p>Establish a Business Leaders Forum</p>	<p>Businesses and Employers will have played a significant role in shaping the council's Economic Development Strategy. Small and medium sized businesses are well informed about business support opportunities, and the council understands their needs and issues to be able to respond and represent these where appropriate.</p> <p>To enable the council to understand the needs of large businesses in the town to be able to respond and represent these where appropriate.</p>
<p>Participation in the Local Government Boundary Review</p>	<p>Residents, businesses, community and voluntary groups are given the opportunity to understand and engage with the proposed changes.</p> <p>In partnership with schools and colleges, deliver sessions to raise awareness of the importance of voting and democracy more widely through schools and colleges.</p>	<p>Increase understanding and participation in local democracy and decision-making processes.</p> <p>Increase in the number of people using their right to vote in Local and General elections.</p>

5. Future ways of working

The council currently engages with local people in a variety of different ways although community engagement activity has not always been planned or joined up effectively across all services and audiences in the past and this is something we intend to focus on going forward.

Our communications channels and activities – including the Harlow Times magazine, website, various newsletters etc. and council events have played an important part in engaging with local people. Over recent years the council has made more and better use of social media platforms and we will continue to use social media as an effective way to engage as wide an audience as possible. 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.

Local people are becoming much more familiar with the council's website following our efforts to increase the number of people able to access services online (for example to pay rent and Council Tax and book services such as green waste and bulky items for collection) 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.

We will strive to develop and embed a new inclusive engagement approach 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 try to ensure that everyone, regardless of background or circumstances, has the same opportunity to share their views; let us know what their needs are; contribute to identifying community solutions to local problems and participating in co-production processes where possible. We will regularly ask local people how they wish to engage with us and will respond to their requirements positively whenever possible.

The Council's inclusive engagement approach will include the following:

- Having clearly defined objectives for engagement and communicating clearly and openly about decision-making processes and resulting actions.
- Being genuinely open to considering new ways of designing and delivering services through a co-production approach.
- Actively seeking to reach those communities and individuals not yet engaged or participating in conversations with the council i.e. hard to reach, vulnerable and minority groups.
- Improving our approach to outreach engagement by incorporating a range of engagement opportunities in our Action Plan – for example pop-up events in the community, public meetings and forums, roadshows, estate walkabouts etc.

- Continuing the joint Business Forum with Harlow Chamber and setting up a new Business Leaders Forum to support two-way conversations with local businesses to better understand and respond to issues affecting economic recovery as a result of the pandemic and future prosperity more generally.
- 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 opportunities and reduce 'engagement fatigue' amongst local people.
- Seeking to identify new and innovative ways to engage local people of all ages and from all backgrounds 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.

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

- Further develop an organisational culture where all Councillors and staff recognise and value the importance of inclusive engagement and consultation.
- Ensure community engagement activity serves to meet both internal and external priorities across all portfolios.
- Observe good practices and available guidance to ensure effective planning, delivery and robust monitoring and evaluation of community engagement activity and regularly liaise with other local authorities to identify new areas of good practice.
- 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 or 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 should include the availability of information in different languages, large print and ‘easy read’ options.
- Ensure that community engagement activity is aligned across all council services and relevant stakeholders; 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).
- 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 and draws on existing community strengths to build stronger, more sustainable communities for the future.
- 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.
- 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 close partnership with the community and voluntary sector to ensure it receives support to strengthen its role in influencing service delivery to meet identified need and receives the recognition it deserves for its achievements in supporting local people.

6. Measuring success

We will consult with local people on the content and aims of this strategy before developing a Community Engagement Action Plan for 2022/23 to 2024/25 that will support implementation of the strategy and set out how we will achieve our aims. Our action plan will be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure it remains aligned to identified need and reflects feedback from local people as a result of targeted engagement activity.

We will undertake action to ensure that effective community engagement is embedded securely within the council's working practices across all service areas and success will be measured against performance targets and desired outcomes contained in the action plan.

To ensure we achieve real culture change and successfully embed an effective and inclusive community engagement model across the organisation, we will include a new Key Performance Indicator to measure the rate, quality and effectiveness of our engagement activity across all council services.

Our monitoring work will also include a focus on the following:

- An internal survey following launch of the strategy to ensure staff awareness and understanding.
- Response rates to statutory and non-statutory consultations.
- Response rates to social media posts and polls.
- Overall effectiveness of Standards Panels and Service Improvement Teams.
- Anecdotal feedback from local people, partner agencies, staff and elected members and case studies where useful and appropriate.

Acknowledgements

Page 7 - LGA Research Report, Demographic Report.