

Stevenage Borough Council

Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2013 to 2016

Listening and Learning



co-operative councils
changing local communities together

Make your voice heard



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Message from the Leader of the Council, Sharon Taylor OBE

Stevenage Borough Council has a long history of engaging with residents to develop services that are relevant and meet their needs. The council is proud that it puts residents at the centre of its decision making and this is reflected by our co-operative principles. This strategy helps us ensure residents remain at the heart of the town and everything we do.

The current economic climate means that difficult decisions will need to be made over the next few years. It is more important than ever that we listen to what residents have to say. We remain firmly committed to giving residents a real voice and a say over the services that affect their lives.

This strategy builds on our existing work and outlines what we will do to improve the way we engage and consult over the next three years. In particular, we will:

- be more proactive when engaging or consulting with residents rather than expecting residents to come to us
- take advantage of new technology and the internet to provide more opportunities for residents to get involved
- provide more feedback to residents about how we have used their comments.

In total, more than 140 individuals and organisations have helped us to develop this strategy. I would personally like to thank them for taking the time to tell us what they think. Their comments have been invaluable and the strategy is stronger for it.

Introduction

Effective consultation and engagement is about asking you what you think before a decision is made. It is about giving you a voice and being willing to listen at all times, not just when it suits the council. Our co-operative principles help ensure your views are valued and can shape council decisions, policies and services.

The way individuals want to be kept informed and involved in decisions, policies and services has changed in recent years. In particular, technology such as the internet and social media has opened up new avenues for people to interact and get involved with the world around them. The council must not be left behind. We have a responsibility to embrace the new ways you want to engage with us, but we must also ensure flexibility so everybody can have their say. We believe that by working together we can create a strong and inclusive community where everybody has the opportunity to influence the issues that affect their lives.

This strategy outlines how the council will approach and promote consultation and engagement. The strategy has been developed in consultation with Stevenage residents, community and voluntary sector groups, council services and councillors.

Co-operative council

In January 2011, the council published its co-operative principles, which are:

- We're here when you need us
- We can all support each other
- You can play a part
- We all understand each other
- We're all working together for our town.

Stevenage has always worked co-operatively and these principles allow us to express to the community how we work and what is important to us.

Working co-operatively means encouraging communities to play a key role in determining what services are needed and how they can be delivered. It means working in a way that benefits everybody. We call this 'sharing the dividends'.

The council champions these principles through community designed, community led and community delivered services.

Community designed services – we will seek and include genuine input from our communities in the services we deliver

Community led services – led by communities and delivered in partnership with the Council

Community delivered services – services that are delivered directly by our communities and residents rather than the council.

Effective consultation and engagement underpins our co-operative principles. Without giving residents an opportunity to have their say, we cannot work together for the benefit of all in Stevenage.

Vision

The vision of this strategy is to promote a strong, resilient and inclusive community in Stevenage. We want everybody to have the opportunity to influence the decisions that affect them, and recognise the benefits of working together and sharing the dividends.

Objectives

Our objectives are what we need to achieve to realise our vision for this strategy. We have identified four key objectives to be achieved by 2016:

- Provide more opportunities for you to influence decisions and a 'menu' of opportunities to match your interests
- Get more residents involved in council decision-making by being more proactive
- Use feedback from consultation and engagement to make council services more relevant to residents' needs
- Improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of consultation and engagement in the council.

Who is this strategy for?

This strategy outlines how the council will involve residents and other people in decision making, policy development and services delivery. Those who will play a role include:

- Residents of Stevenage (anybody who lives or works in Stevenage)
- People and organisations who use the council's services
- Voluntary and community groups
- Stevenage businesses and their staff
- Councillors
- Stevenage Borough Council staff
- Public partners (Police, NHS and the County Council).

SoStevenage

SoStevenage is Stevenage's local partnership and is made up of public organisations, voluntary and community organisations and businesses that work to improve the lives of Stevenage residents. SoStevenage provides a forum for the council, its partners and residents to discuss the priorities for the town and how they can be met. Through SoStevenage, partners will help promote consultation and engagement, and ensure that our strategies and activities are relevant to those who live, work, study and visit Stevenage.

What do we mean by engagement?

Engagement involves a wide range of activities to include you in decisions, policies and services. By engagement we generally mean one of the following:

- Information
- Consultation
- Participation

These activities range from keeping you informed about basic changes to services to residents directly delivering a service.


Engagement type	Information	Consultation	Participation
Nature of relationship and engagement	council → resident When we need to let you know about decisions, policies and service changes but are not always asking for any feedback.	council ← resident When we ask you for feedback on particular policies, decisions or services. The methods used can be informal conversations or formal surveys and activities.	council ↔ resident You can play an active role in the design and delivery of services. This involves ongoing dialogue and negotiation between the council and residents.
Example activities:	Leaflets, posters, Chronicle, local news articles, public notices and www.stevenage.gov.uk	Surveys, formal consultations and focus groups.	Conferences, forums, focus groups, volunteering, resident groups, scrutiny and environmental groups.

Our principles

These principles show how the council will approach consultation and engagement in Stevenage to involve you in decision making, policy development and service delivery. These principles help ensure the council embeds our co-operative council ethos. There are three broad consultation and engagement principles:

Inclusiveness

Effective consultation and engagement helps us better understand the potential impact of our decisions. In particular, it helps us to understand what the effects of our decisions are on different types of residents and enables us to fulfil our duties under the Equality Act 2010.



The council should provide clear and well publicised opportunities for residents to have their say. While this strategy commits the council to making better use of technology, this will not happen at the expense of inclusiveness. We will continue to provide a range of appropriate opportunities for you to get involved. The council must use a variety of response methods including the internet, social media and traditional methods such as surveys, face-to-face meetings and focus groups to consult and engage.

Integrity

Acting with integrity means more than acting in good faith. Integrity means being open about the purpose of our engagement, providing feedback when you respond, keeping you informed and doing what we said we will do.

In order to be genuine, consultation and engagement must take place before a decision is made. Engagement should be embedded into the way all councils make decisions. It should not be an afterthought and we should not only ask your views when we want to change something. We will prioritise engagement activity so we spend longer seeking your views at the beginning of the decision-making process rather than at the end.

We want to offer more opportunities for you to participate in the design and delivery of everything the council does but consultation should be proportional. On many issues, you are probably satisfied to simply be kept informed of any changes as long as there are still opportunities to provide feedback. On some issues, for example when the council changes a phone number, there is no need to consult and seek your views.

We will ensure that when we first contact you we are open and clear about why we are carrying out the engagement activity. We will outline how your views will have an impact. If we cannot act on your views, we will give reasons why this is the case when we provide feedback.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness means making sure your views contribute to decisions, policies and services. This makes sure council services meet your need. We can be more effective by being more proactive. This means asking what you are interested in and making a bigger effort to send you information based on your preferences.

Another aspect of effectiveness is that all consultation and engagement activity should represent value for money through:

- Greater co-ordination between services
- Appropriate consultation timescales
- Taking advantage of new technology, particularly the internet
- Limiting the use of consultants
- Using feedback more effectively.

Summary of principles

Principle	What does this mean?
Inclusiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seeking input before a decision is made• Providing different opportunities for you to have your say• Publicising opportunities more• Giving everybody the opportunity to have their say; particularly if your views are less frequently heard.
Integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being clear about the purpose of our engagement• Keeping you informed• Doing what we said we will do• Letting you know what we did as a result.
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Better co-ordination between services• Taking advantage of the internet• Using and sharing feedback more effectively.

What we will do

The council already provides a range of opportunities for you to tell us what they think. We want to embed our co-operative principles through our engagement opportunities. By offering a menu of opportunities shaped by you and other residents, you can choose to be involved as much or as little as you like.

We will:

- continue to provide face-to-face opportunities for you to have your say through Café Choice, public meetings, forums and residents' groups
- provide advice and support to residents who want to be involved in residents' groups and forums
- investigate new opportunities for you to engage with the council, for example, through the overview and scrutiny processes
- work closely with key groups and residents, especially voluntary and community sector organisations, so they can continue to influence council decisions
- keep you informed about how they can get involved in service design and delivery, and the way we make decisions
- help local businesses understand how they can have their say on issues that matter to them
- update the consultation and engagement toolkit, which gives staff practical advice on carrying out consultation and engagement
- introduce Engagement Champions in each service area to act as a critical friend and promote good practice for consultation and engagement
- support councillors in their engagement with you and other residents.

Resident involvement

A key objective of this strategy is to increase resident involvement in council decision making. We want to empower you and strengthen your local voice so you can help design and shape local services.

We want to support the development of local groups of residents who together can have a bigger impact on your local community. Working with key partners, we will develop a Resident Involvement Toolkit. The toolkit will give guidance on how to set up a local group, how to become formally recognised by the council and how to bid for funding.

Strong community leaders

You elect your local councillors and they are there to represent your views. They are one example of several leaders in your local community and work closely with local groups to improve your area.

All Stevenage councillors have a community budget, which is a pot of money they can use to give grants to local groups and causes. Councillors will work with you and local groups to decide how the money should be spent. This may mean holding public meetings and consulting with local groups and residents to decide what will work best in your area. Each councillor will be personally responsible for deciding how best to engage and consult with you on their community budget.

The views of business

There are some world class businesses based in the town including AVC, MBDA, Fujitsu, Astrium, GlaxoSmithKline, The Wine Society, DuPont, and Server Choice. All of Stevenage's businesses are vital to the town and its economy, creating jobs and opportunities.

Businesses know what could benefit the town, encourage companies into the area and ensure good employment levels. Council decisions can also have a big impact on their operations and profit levels.

Businesses can get involved by joining in our partnerships like SoStevenage, attending our business summits, taking part in our networking events or participating in one of our working groups. When we think a topic will be of interest, we will actively seek their views through surveys, polls and focus groups. The council is committed to working with and listening to businesses and we will continue to involve them in our decisions.

Working with the voluntary and community sector

Stevenage has a thriving voluntary and community sector, which supports many residents. Often voluntary and community groups have expertise in their field and can speak for their clients. Their views are very valuable and we will carry on seeking their views when we engage and consult.

Online engagement gateway

A key priority of this strategy will be the introduction of an online engagement gateway. This would:

- be a single portal for residents, groups and businesses to find out how to influence council services
- take advantage of the internet and social media to improve the quality and accessibility of our consultations
- allow you to register your details, tell us what you are interested in and how you like to be contacted
- allow discussion topics for you to talk to other residents about the issues that matter in your communities
- help the council co-ordinate consultation and engagement to improve quality and reduce costs.

We will work closely with residents and local groups to explore the development of an online engagement system. This should make it easier for you to find out about council decisions and how they can influence the way we work. The system will allow the council to take a more proactive approach to engagement, allowing us to engage with you by your preferred method on the issues that matter to you.

We have proposed a number of specific actions to help us achieve the objectives outlined in this strategy and they can be found on the following page.

How we will measure success

It is important for us to monitor our progress against the strategy's objectives. The delivery of the associated action plan will be monitored through the council's Corporate Improvement Programme.

We will monitor progress on the following:

- The number of residents engaging with council services
- Satisfaction levels from resident surveys
- Costs of paper and telephone surveys
- Number and range of opportunities for engagement and participation.

Actions	Objective
Better opportunities	
1. Investigate the introduction of an online engagement gateway. This would provide a single place to list all consultation and engagement activity across the council. It would also allow residents to register their interest in council services and targeted invitations to participate.	1, 2, 3, 4
2. Introduce a menu of involvement to increase the accessibility of consultation and engagement with greater flexibility on how residents can get involved to suit their needs.	1, 2
3. Review processes so residents' views are sought earlier and more often when making decisions and policies.	1, 3, 4
4. Explore additional opportunities for residents to engage with the council, for example, through Overview and Scrutiny Committee.	1, 2
Increasing our effectiveness	
5. Improve the co-ordination of consultation and engagement activity across the council. This will include a plan of all upcoming consultations.	3, 4
6. Provide training for councillors and officers to develop consultation and engagement skills.	2, 3, 4
7. Introduce engagement champions in each service area and an engagement champions officer group to promote engagement and best practice across the council.	1,3, 4
8. Review the council's templates and other documents so they are clear and reflect this strategy.	4
9. Review emerging research (for example, Ofcom's Internet Use and Attitude Bulletin) on internet attitudes and behaviours to inform how we engage.	4
Keeping residents in the loop	
10. Clarify roles, responsibilities and expectations for residents, councillors and officers to outline the level of commitment and scope for change for all engagement activity. This means we will clearly state the purpose of the engagement, what aspects can and cannot be changed and how any feedback from residents will influence the outcome.	2,3,4
11. Develop relationships with existing groups to promote input from seldom heard and vulnerable groups to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to influence the council.	1,2
12. Provide feedback to residents every time we ask for their views. Feedback will summarise responses and how they have had an impact. If we cannot implement proposals from resident's views, we will give clear reasons explaining why.	3,4



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