

Report to Local Councils Liaison Committee

Date of meeting: 16 November 2015

Subject: Public Consultation and Engagement

Officer: V. Loftis (Consultation Officer (01992) 564471))

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the Committee consider the ways in which local town and parish councils can support the District Council in undertaking consultation and engagement with local residents.

Report

1. Epping Forest District Council carries out a great deal of public consultation. It relies on the support of other organisations to assist, not only by providing responses in their own right but also by helping Epping Forest District Council raise awareness of consultation through their own channels of communication. The purpose of this report is to raise awareness of the invaluable role local Town and Parish Councils can play in helping the District Council publicise its consultation exercises to their local residents, businesses and other stakeholders through Parish-based newsletters, noticeboards, meetings, websites, social media and other local communication tools.

Background

2. In 2006, the Council adopted a Public Engagement and Consultation Policy which identified and registered all public consultation carried out by the Council during the year and all planned consultation for the following twelve months. An annual report is then submitted to a Members Panel which scrutinises the methods, costs and effectiveness of the consultation.
3. Each year there is an expectation to manage the costs of consultation within officer time and resources. The Council has therefore to find cost effective ways in which to consult its stakeholders, both users and non-users of its services. Agreeing a common, co-ordinated approach to public engagement can become more efficient and save money.
4. In engaging with the public about a service, policy or any other issue, the focus is on finding out the current needs, concerns, priorities or satisfaction levels of current and potential service users. Giving people a voice in decisions that concern them is an effective way of helping them to become involved in improving their quality of life and the quality of services we provide. The benefits of effective public involvement can improve local democracy and help with community integration and cohesion. There are many and varied reasons why we as a local authority consult our stakeholders either in general or specific terms e.g.:
 - openness, transparency and accountability are good for democracy;
 - key communities and individuals will be included, and more people have the opportunity to be involved in policy and decision-making; and
 - making better decisions based on 'informed' information;

- engagement activity will provide value for money;
 - through public engagement there will be confidence in the results; and
 - as it is a legal duty to consult.
5. Epping Forest District Council carries out consultation with a wide range of individuals and groups and organisations such as:
- residents;
 - tenants;
 - leaseholders;
 - park home owners;
 - businesses;
 - shoppers;
 - commuters, and
 - young people.
6. Town and Parish Councils are among the key Council organisations consulted on a range of issues along with other statutory agencies such as the Health Services and Police. Recent consultation has included:
- Residents, tenants and leaseholders feedback and satisfaction, e.g., Housing and Homelessness;
 - surveys on housing policies, repairs and maintenance. Park Home owner's policies;
 - crime and disorder prevention surveys;
 - young people and their representatives through the Youth Council, (in schools and in Conference). For example, The HealthWorks Survey; Women and Girls in Sport; and transport consultation;
 - targeted surveys on equality issues;
 - Local Plan surveys;
 - local boundary changes consultation; and
 - other surveys involved taxi drivers and dog owners, Gambling Licence holders and groups concerned with conservation and economic and business regeneration.
7. The Council uses a range of ways to raise consultation awareness, taking into account the size and scale of the consultation and the groups needed to be consulted, e.g.:
- social media;
 - the Council's website;
 - the local press;
 - emails;
 - business breakfasts and conferences;
 - meetings; and
 - webcasting.
8. The methods the Council use include:
- focus groups;
 - vox pops;
 - interactive surveys using cloud-based technology; and paper-based questionnaires; and
 - canvassing, face-to-face.
9. The services local authorities provide have an impact on people's lives. Impact assessments are carried out as part of the statutory 'Equality Duty', which ensures people are treated equally. Protecting people's identity and opinion by following the guidelines of the 'Data Protection' and 'Freedom of Information Act', is important to us.

10. The Council has developed its website to include a consultation page called WebHub which is a base for information around public engagement and consultation. Each piece of consultation registered shows a process of quality assured compliance with the Council's Public Engagement Policy and Strategy. A record of each phase of the engagement eg, the overview and reasons for consultation, the start and finish dates, the contact details and joining instructions, and upon conclusion, the results and feedback to our respondents. The Webhub also contains consultation news. You can subscribe to any or all of the RSS feeds about consultations of interest to you. There is also a link to any e-petitions or regular meetings such as tenant and leaseholder participation forums. The WebHub can be accessed via: <http://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/index.php/contact-us/consultation>
11. Public engagement plans are included in the annual budget reports for submission to the Councils business planning process. The Council has carried out 103 separate surveys over the last five years. 43 were registered in the last two years. A budget of £208K was estimated to cover the overall consultation cost over this period. The 43 surveys were as follows:
 - 7 surveys were housing related;
 - 6 were annual surveys e.g., The Community Safety Crime and Disorder Public Perception Survey; Homelessness Strategy; Local Council Tax Support Scheme etc;
 - 7 Local Area Neighbourhood Plans in association with Town and Parish Councils;
 - 5 surveys were open to all residents/stakeholders;
 - 38 were targeted surveys to specific groups e.g., Taxi drivers, Park Home Owners etc.
 - 22 surveys were interactive (online) digital, paperless surveys; and
 - 18 were statutory surveys (including the Local Plan).
12. Epping Forest District Council uses targeted surveys and approaches to engaging the public to keep the cost of consultation low. The majority of the Council's consultation is carried out by council officers. The Council has invested in a cloud-based questionnaire creator called 'Snap Webhost'. This software provides a unique reference or 'url', which can be attached to any digital or paper-based communication. In attaching 'urls' to correspondence, the Council is able to reach its targets groups via email or social media.
13. The 'Market Research Society', considers that two years is the maximum time period when public opinion from historic consultation may be reliable. The reason behind this thinking is that changes in people's attitudes and opinions may be affected by specific events. For example, 'feeling safe in your area after dark', in the responses to the 'Crime and Disorder Prevention Surveys', changed after the riots and arson attacks in London and Enfield in 2012, and were markedly different from the previous year. The emphasis therefore, placed on collecting feedback on current responses gives validity and credibility to the research being done.
14. Town and Parish Councils work at the heart of local communities and therefore are well placed to communicate and share important information affecting communities locally. With this in mind a questionnaire was sent to Town and Parish Councils in October to gain information about the platforms that could be used to inform and engage residents and businesses locally. Co-operation and co-ordination helps to maximise the reach of consultation with tenants, businesses and partners in the District. The preferred outcomes will be that:
 - key communities and individuals will be included;
 - the public will experience a reasonable amount of engagement;
 - relevant information will be provided;
 - there will be public confidence in the results;
 - the engagement activity will provide value for money.

15. As part of our engagement we asked Town and Parish Councils what platforms were available for consultation purposes. Just over a third of Town and Parishes in the District responded.
- 7 said they used a newsletter;
 - 7 have use of a website;
 - 8 used notice boards;
 - 8 Council agenda; and
 - 5 use Social Media.
16. Other platforms for communication were:
- town and parish magazines and newsletters;
 - personal visits, meeting with local interest groups;
 - community and church magazines eg, Link Up; and
 - local press releases, Everything Epping Forest.
17. You also told us what you thought people would be interested in locally: The Local Plan, Local Neighbourhood Area Plan, Conservation, Waste and Recycling, Crime and Disorder Prevention.
18. Other topics of interest were:
- housing, development sites;
 - the Green Belt;
 - parking and road management measures;
 - transport, street lighting;
 - activities for Young People and Senior Citizens;
 - leisure activities and facilities;
 - community events;
 - open spaces, trees;
 - highways and roads but also local highways panels, parking; and
 - new issues, projects.

Next steps

19. The information that Town and Parish Councils provided in the questionnaire will be used to help officer's in future public consultation and be helpful in planning communication and working together to promote and publicise consultation.