

# Consultation and Engagement Policy

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# Consultation and Engagement Policy

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## 1. PURPOSE

Dorset Council consults and engages on a wide range of topics and issues relating to the services it provides for its residents. Committed to listening to residents and communities when developing and shaping our services, we conduct formal and informal activities and have direct and indirect conversations on a regular basis.

We want to ensure we formalise these activities, both statutory and non-statutory, be more consistent as a council in how we plan and approach our communities, and to ensure we are using accessible methods to allow them to engage with us in a way that best suits them. By doing so, we can develop a better understanding of the aspirations, needs and concerns of the residents of Dorset, and ensure we take these into account in our decision-making and service delivery. Building relationships and having ongoing dialogue leads to richer and more valuable understanding which can help better shape services based on what we have heard from our communities. This process also facilitates building a level of consistency and trust between the council and our residents.

This policy sets out a **basic level of principles that consultation and engagement taking place throughout Dorset Council will adopt**. Guidance for staff on consultation is given in the Dorset Council Consultation Protocol document. The protocol is also supported by a toolkit which contains practical advice, templates and useful information for officers carrying out consultation and engagement activity.

## 2. SCOPE

This policy applies to all consultation and engagement work undertaken or commissioned by Dorset Council with councillors, customers, residents, businesses, visitors, and other external stakeholders, for example, other agencies and contractors. This may range from a statutory consultation to informal engagement work.

The policy is **applicable to external consultation** by Dorset Council but excludes internal consultation within the organisation itself. For example please note that consultation in relation to employee pay and conditions is a separate process and led by Human Resources

Consultation on planning applications, the Local Plan and Traffic Regulation Orders are also out of scope for this policy.

### 3. OUR VISION

Our vision as Dorset Council is:

- to involve local people in decisions and issues that affect them
- a commitment to provide opportunities to listen to and incorporate the voices of all Dorset residents by engaging them in ways that suit them
- to work in a way that builds trust and confidence in council processes and decision making
- where everyone feels heard and that their opinion matters

### 4. WHAT IS CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT?

Consultation and engagement are the involvement and participation of people in decision-making. For Dorset Council, these activities help us to establish and to build more streamlined and effective services by having increased community involvement and a clearer voice in shaping local service provision.

**Consultation** is a formal process, and, in some cases, the council will have a statutory duty and be bound by legislation to consult before making changes to policy or service provision. Consultations have a clear remit and start and end points. However, consultation still forms a distinct part of an ongoing period of engagement and is part of a formal decision-making process. Failure to follow specific principles and conducting a consultation incorrectly may lead to judicial review.

#### Consultation is:

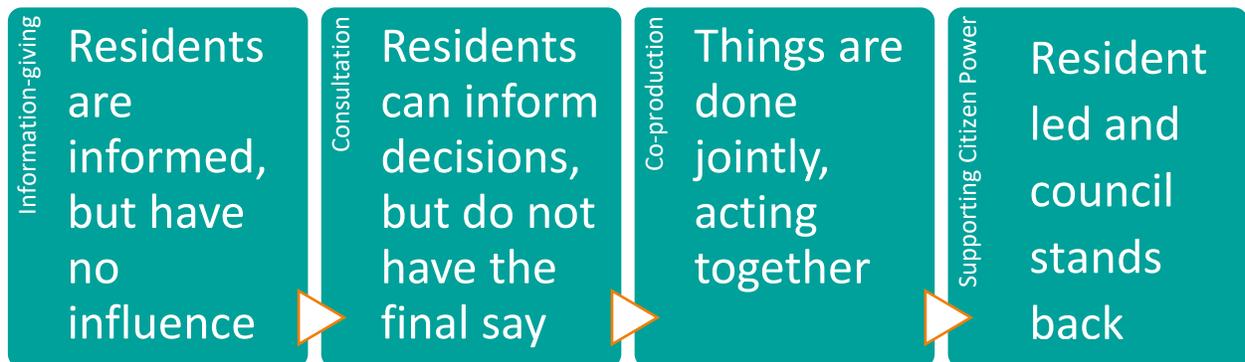
*“The dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based on a genuine exchange of views with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action”*

**Engagement is:**

*“Developing and sustaining a working relationship between one or more public body and one or more community group, to help them both to understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences.”*

**Engagement** is a broader, more exploratory process that can be used and embedded in many areas of council work. At the heart of engagement is developing relationships and building the opportunities for ongoing dialogue between public bodies and the community. It can involve a range of activities and different levels of public involvement. Ongoing engagement can support a greater level of understanding of more complex issues and the decision-making process. It should be a standard part of council practice to engage residents and service users to gather ideas, opinions, and feedback on how we work to enable us to be more responsive.

An activity is only a consultation if there is **scope for consultees to influence a decision**. Both consultation and engagement form part of a continuum on ‘ladder of participation’ (Arnstein, 1969) which the Consultation Institute has streamlined into four key parts: Information-giving, Consultation, Co-production and Supporting Citizen Power.



At Dorset Council we have **defined the wider range of activities as we work with our residents**. These are:

**Inform** - Sharing information about changes that could happen so people understand what they mean

**Consult** - Asking for people's opinions on ideas or options

**Engage** - Listening to people to understand issues and ideas for change

**Co-design** - Designing with people and bringing their ideas into the final approach



**Co-production** - People with lived or learnt experience work in partnership with us, from start to finish on a project.

Co-design and Co-production are important methods increasingly used throughout the council to ensure services are created to meet resident's needs.

## 5. WHY DOES DORSET COUNCIL UNDERTAKE CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY

Dorset Council first and foremost wants to understand the needs of residents and provide the best possible services.

Section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 sets out a Duty to Consult representatives of a wide range of local persons. We must consult representatives of council taxpayers, those who use or are likely to use services provided by the authority, and those appearing to the authority to have an interest in any area within which the authority carries out functions. Authorities should include local voluntary and community organisations and local businesses in consultation.

As well as having a duty to consult, good consultation and engagement can have a number of benefits. As Dorset Council, we aim to:

- Work in a data and evidence-led way to build, shape and deliver more well-rounded and effective services
- Identify new or alternative ideas and to highlight impacts we may not have thought of or to challenge any assumptions we have made.
- Build relationships and promote confidence and trust between the council and its residents and partners.
- Better understand the needs, priorities, and aspirations of our residents and to identify ways we can work together to meet them.
- Listen to our residents and to act on their concerns.
- Encourage wider participation from people and from groups we do not normally hear from.
- Use new and innovative ways to reach and engage people in ways that suit them.
- Widen opportunities for residents to gain understanding of council processes and decision making.
- Build understanding of local issues and priorities.
- Share learnings and insights within the organization and to use them effectively across council services to improve delivery and provision.
- Establish where the council can provide better value for money.

Engagement activities should be embedded as part of an ongoing dialogue and engagement with our residents. Engaging well can increase levels of trust, perceptions of openness, encourage inclusive practices and can lead to collaboration. It can also mean difficult decisions are accepted more readily as people have been informed or involved throughout the process

As stated, consultation is a discrete activity that forms part of the process that is bound by specific legislation and principles. These are covered in the next section.

## Consultation principles and legislation

Consultations should be conducted where there is scope for residents to influence a decision. This may be a statutory duty (i.e., written in law) or where there is a legitimate expectation by consultees that they would expect to be consulted.

When we consult we follow a number of key principles. Any consultation is carried out in accordance with the Gunning principles; these are four fundamental principles for carrying out consultation, summarised below:

### Gunning Principles

1. Consultation must take place when the proposal is at a **formative stage**
2. **Sufficient reasons** must be put forward for the proposal to allow for intelligent consideration and response
3. **Adequate time** must be given for consideration and response
4. The product of consultation must be **conscientiously taken into account**.

The **Government** has also set out their own standards that should be adopted when engaging and consulting with stakeholders. You can find more detail on the Government principles [here](#). They are that consultations should:

- Be clear and concise
- Have a purpose
- Be informative
- Be only part of a process of engagement
- Last for a proportionate amount of time
- Be targeted – ensure the right people are consulted
- Take account of the groups being consulted
- Be agreed before publication
- Facilitate scrutiny

- Have the responses published in a timely fashion
- Not generally be launched during local or national election periods.

The **Consultation Institute** has developed its own Charter containing seven principles as shown in the image, and listed below.



### **Principle 1 The INTEGRITY of Consultation**

The process must have an honest intention. The Consultor must be willing to listen to the views advanced by consultees, and be prepared to be influenced when making subsequent decisions.

### **Principle 2 The VISIBILITY of Consultation**

All those who have a justifiable right to participate in a consultation should be made reasonably aware of the exercise

### **Principle 3 The ACCESSIBILITY of Consultation**

Consultees must be able to have reasonable access to the exercise. This means that the methods chosen must be appropriate for the intended audience and that effective means

are used to cater for the special needs of 'seldom heard' groups and others with special requirements.

#### **Principle 4 The TRANSPARENCY of Consultation**

Many Consultations are highly public, and rightly so. Consultation submissions will be published unless specific exemptions apply. Consultees rightly expect full transparency of the governance arrangements applicable to a consultation and the decision-making process which will follow.

#### **Principle 5 The DISCLOSURE obligations in Consultation**

For consultation to succeed, and to encourage a measure of trust between the parties, it is important to provide for reasonable disclosure of relevant information. Consultors are under a duty to disclose information which could materially influence the nature and extent of consultees' responses. But note that the Data Protection Act 1988 applies to information of a "personal nature"

#### **Principle 6 The FAIR INTERPRETATION of Consultation**

Information and viewpoints gathered through Consultation exercises have to be collated and assessed, and this task must be undertaken promptly and objectively

#### **Principle 7 The PUBLICATION of Consultation**

Participants in a consultation exercise have a proper expectation that they will see both the output and the outcome of the process. Except in certain Closed or Internal consultations, the assumption should be that publication in a form accessible to the consultee would follow within a reasonable time after the conclusion of the exercise

### **Other considerations**

**Public Sector Equality Duty** requires local authorities to have 'due regard' to the impact of changes on those with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010; Age, Disability, Gender Reassignment, Marriage and Civil Partnership, Pregnancy and Maternity, Race, Religion and Belief, Sex, Sexual Orientation. Consultations that are outside of statutory requirements should still be undertaken in accordance with this policy.

**Engagement activities** are less bound by law and statutes; however, the council will consider any relevant legislation in conducting these activities such as the Equality Act (2010) and the Data Protection Act (2018).

## 5. WHAT IS DORSET COUNCIL'S APPROACH TO CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT?

At Dorset Council, when we engage with our residents and communities at any level, we aspire to work to the key principles and best practice, but also to our own standards. Our activities should be proportionate to the type and scale of the potential impact of the proposal and decision being taken. They may also depend on resourcing and the needs of the participants.

The activities we conduct will be informed by data and be evidence-led; we will also use best practice guidelines on how to effectively engage with different people and groups at various stages of the process. The Dorset Council central consultation team supports colleagues in undertaking Consultation and Engagement.

When conducting any type of consultation or engagement activity, Dorset Council **has its own standards** that we will adhere to.



These **bring together the key principles and best practice**, including the Gunning principles, Government principles, the Consultation Institute Charter and other requirements into a clear set of Dorset Council Principles

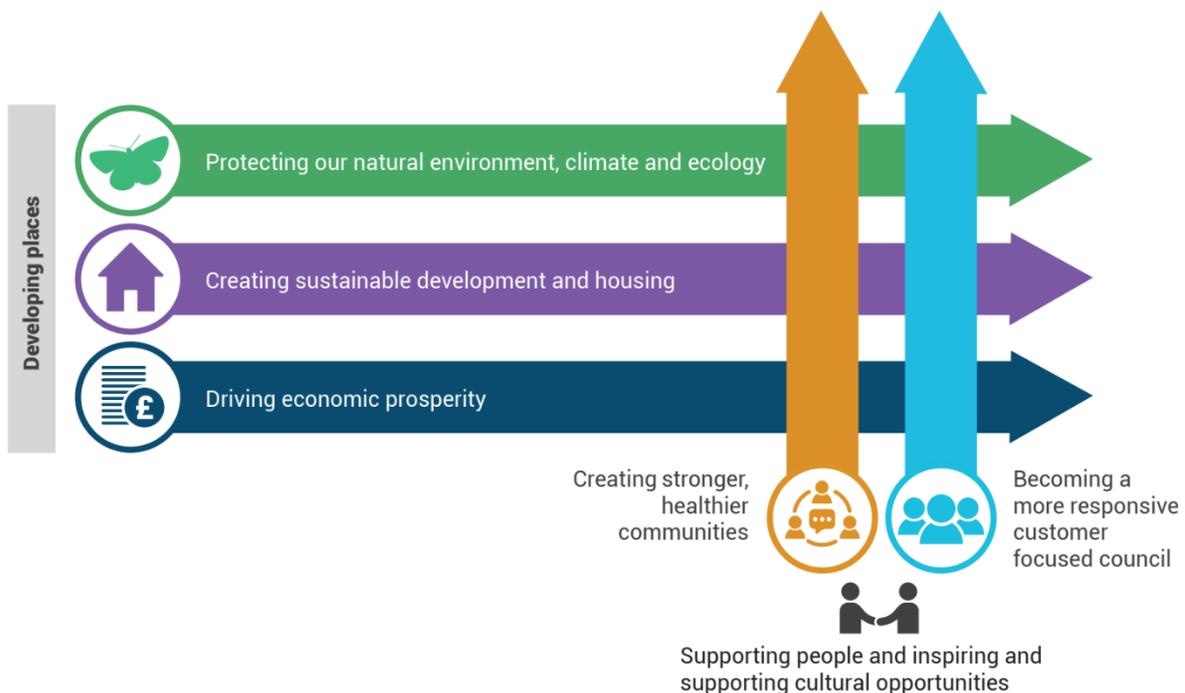
- **Legal Standards** – we will adhere to any legal guidance, principles, or processes when we consult, including only consulting if residents' involvement can influence the topic in question.

- **Participation** – we will actively encourage participation in our activities from all residents in the Dorset Council area, especially those who are seldom heard, giving opportunities for people to engage in ways that suit them using a variety of techniques.
- **Consistency** – we will consult and engage with stakeholders and the public in a more consistent way across council services.
- **Planning** – we will effectively plan our activities to ensure there is sufficient time to design, undertake and to feedback on them and for residents to be able to take part. We will also pool our resources where possible and join up our working to reduce the likelihood of consultation fatigue and duplication of effort.
- **Accessibility** – we will ensure that our activities are as accessible as possible to encourage participation from the widest range of residents. This includes factors such as language, format, location, and time.
- **Inclusion** – we will ensure that our activities are inclusive and that we understand our communities, their composition, needs and priorities and how we can mitigate any barriers to participation.
- **Capacity** – we will ensure that those responsible for facilitating consultation and engagement activity have the relevant knowledge, skills, and training to do the work.
- **Partnerships** – we will work together across our council service areas and with our external partner agencies and organisations.
- **Communication** – we will ensure that all appropriate channels of communication are used, whether to promote our activities, to reach out to seldom-heard groups or to feedback the outcomes of our work.
- **Transparency and accountability** – we will be clear about our reasons for consulting or engaging, our expectations of those who choose to take part, and be clear on the decision-making process and how the results will be used. We will take responsibility and be accountable for our processes and decision-making
- **Feedback** – we will ensure we communicate any outcomes or decisions made to stakeholders and all relevant parties, including the public, and how or where their input has been considered. This will be provided in a suitable format.
- **Evaluation** – we will review our activities and actively ask for feedback to be able to evaluate how successful they have been and to take any learning forward.

## LINKS TO CORPORATE PRIORITIES, PLANS AND OTHER RELEVANT DOCUMENTATION

Within Dorset Council we have a shared responsibility to conduct effective consultation and engagement. Our activities should align closely with our priorities as Dorset Council and the [Council Plan \(2020 – 2024\)](#) which sets out our vision to make Dorset a great place to live, work and visit.

Our consultation and engagement activities help us work towards this vision by helping us to listen more effectively and giving us a better understanding of the needs of local people. Consultation and engagement helps us to respond by planning, testing, and delivering better services, and ensures that we are accountable and transparent in any decision-making we undertake. Our activities ensure that our residents and communities have an opportunity to engage with us in a way that suits them and where they feel listened to.



Dorset Council is also developing other community focused strategies which will closely inform how the council involves and engages with the community and places them at the heart of everything we do.



**EQIA:** When we conduct consultation and engagement activity, a thread of our work is assessing the impact that our proposals are likely to have on different groups or people in Dorset. An EQIA helps us to consider the actual or potential impact of our activities and decisions on people, particularly those with protected characteristics.

**Data Protection/Privacy Notice or Policy** During the course of any consultation or engagement activity we will comply with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018 when handling personal data. You can find more information on Dorset Council's information governance and data protection [here](#) .

Useful organisations we work with

**The Consultation Institute:** The Institute promotes and supports best practice in public and stakeholder consultation in the public, private and voluntary sectors

**Local Government Association (LGA) New Conversations 2.0** The Local Government Association have produced a resource – New Conversations 2.0 – that can support the basic aspects of consultation and engagement.

## SUPPORT FOR CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY

While responsibility for consultation within Dorset Council is spread across the organisation, the activity is supported by Dorset Council's central Consultation and Engagement team. The team provide support and advice to the wider council. The team **will** be involved in any statutory consultation delivered by the council.

The central team have produced a Consultation Protocol which guides staff through the consultation and engagement process.

The team can be contacted: [consultation@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk](mailto:consultation@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk)