



Report of the Chief Officer, Executive Support

to Executive Board

Date: 10 November 2006

Subject: Corporate community engagement policy and toolkit

Electoral Wards Affected:

All

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

Executive Summary

This report details the development of the council's community engagement policy and toolkit, which are presented for Executive Board approval.

Effective consultation and engagement enables the council to make well-informed decisions about the future of services by asking citizens and stakeholders for their views on what services they want, the services being provided and changes or improvements needed.

The council is committed to a more co-ordinated approach to community engagement and consultation across the city with other partners. As such, it needs to improve its own strategic approach to community engagement and consultation – an area which also was highlighted as a weakness in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

The council's intent to develop its strategic approach to community engagement and consultation will be demonstrated by a Community Engagement Policy and supported by a toolkit that provides guidance on good practice. There are many aspects to consultation and engagement at all levels and these developments will help to achieve more consistent and effective engagement, particularly with diverse communities.

1.0 Purpose Of This Report

- 1.1 This report presents the *Community Engagement Policy* and the *Community Engagement Toolkit* for approval and adoption. The policy sets out the council's overall approach to community engagement and is complemented by the toolkit which is a comprehensive guide to good practice. They are both key components of the council's strategic approach towards joined-up consultation and engagement.

2.0 Background Information

- 2.1 The council must engage with local people to help manage and measure progress under the seven strategic outcomes as set out under the Corporate Plan 2004-2007. Creating a culture of involvement and participation will enable people from different communities and backgrounds to take active roles in delivering a better quality of life for themselves and others. Developing a more consistent approach to consultation and engagement will help to address inequality and build a sense of fairness, inclusion and better cohesion within all communities
- 2.2 Leeds City Council supports the city-wide strategy on community engagement – as set out as an aspiration within the Vision for Leeds 2004–2020. The Vision for Leeds 2004–2020 makes a commitment to develop a more strategic approach to community engagement across the city. As a partner of Leeds Initiative, the council itself will develop a more systematic and co-ordinated approach to community engagement. The council has actively contributed to the development of Leeds Initiative's *Framework for Effective Community Participation* and action plan.
- 2.3 The strategic approach to consultation and engagement was to be developed as part of the council's Corporate Communications Strategy 2005-2008 (approved by Executive Board on 21 October 2005). This would aim to bring about better co-ordination of activities, more effective consultation and engagement and better collaboration between internal service departments when engaging with citizens of Leeds.

3.0 Main Issues

- 3.1 The council's strategic approach to community engagement and consultation consists of four key components:
- a corporate Community Engagement Policy
 - a corporate Community Engagement Toolkit
 - a council-wide community engagement networking group
 - an on-line consultation portal and information database

These components are all linked and complement each other and form an overall approach towards joined-up community engagement. Further components such as training for consultation are to be developed.

- 3.2 The corporate Community Engagement Policy clearly sets out the council's approach to consultation and engagement. It reflects the council's aspirations and commitment to understanding the views, needs, desires and preferences of its citizens, including those from vulnerable, minority and not yet reached groups. This will ensure that the way we consult and engage is consistent, co-ordinated and able to respond to change.

- 3.3 The policy has been drafted as a corporate document that, following approval and adoption, can be communicated widely cross all council departments. The policy will be put into action through department plans and service plans. This will help to bring about a more consistent approach across the council.
- 3.4 The policy will link with the partnership approach to community engagement across the city led by Leeds Initiative. It has been developed alongside the city-wide Framework for Effective Community Participation and there is consistency between the council's approach and the city-wide approach.
- 3.5 The Community Engagement Toolkit is a comprehensive guidance document. It complements the council's policy and has been designed to help staff put the principles (as set out in the policy) into practice. It provides guidance and good practice, focusing upon 'how we engage with people in Leeds'.
- 3.6 The toolkit has purposely been drafted as a document for the council Intranet (PDFs) rather than be presented as hard copies. This is to ensure that it can be updated regularly and accessible to all. This format will also ensure that any relevant information or section within toolkit can be found quickly.
- 3.7 The development and consultation process for the toolkit and policy has been comprehensive and inclusive. The toolkit has drawn on good practice nationally and opinions on its content were taken from some key internal staff in the initial stages. Discussions with officers who carry out consultation activity, area managers and co-ordinators, equality team, children's services, planning officers (Statement of Community Involvement), service and improvement officers and communications officers also took place.
- 3.8 The documents were developed into draft format and then put to consultation widely, including all councillors, town/parish councils, Leeds Initiative, Leeds Voice, NHS, the West Yorkshire Youth Association, university youth participation adviser and benchmarked with some other local authorities.
- 3.9 Following approval, the policy and toolkit would be rolled out council-wide over the subsequent few months through a specific communications plan. To ensure that the approval process is structured, the toolkit and policy have already been presented to Corporate Management team, Corporate Governance and Audit Committee and Scrutiny Board for their approval. Final approval is now sought from Executive Board.
- 3.10 The Community Engagement Policy document is attached (**appendix 1**). The draft format of Toolkit can be found on the Intranet under; ***Interest areas/Corporate communications/Consultation/CommunityEngagementToolkit***. Links still need to be added.

4.0 Implications For Council Policy And Governance

- 4.1 Leeds City Council has a statutory responsibility to consult with citizens, users groups and communities under Schedule 3 of the Local Government Act 1999. Consultation ensures that citizens, user groups and communities are receiving best value services and the council takes these statutory obligations very seriously. As well as fulfilling its statutory obligation the council will also take a proactive approach to develop good practice and create a culture of participation and involvement. The policy and toolkit will be vital tools to help achieve this aim.

- 4.2 The Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment and the Local Public Service Agreement with the government also support the importance of a more co-ordinated approach to community engagement. This area was identified as a weakness within the council's Comprehensive Performance Assessment. If the council is to maintain 'excellent' status at the next review it needs to demonstrate how this weakness is being addressed.
- 4.3 The Leeds City Council Corporate Plan 2005/08 makes specific reference to community consultation and the need to improve our capabilities. This plan states that we will improve consultation and engagement when delivering all aspects of services and put a corporate engagement strategy into practice. This will include working with our partners across the city to improve the quality and co-ordination of consultation and engagement.
- 4.4 The Council Plan for 2005/06 highlighted the need to improve and develop the council's overall consultation function as a means of effective two-way communication and involving citizens, groups and communities in decision making as a key improvement area.
- 4.5 The Corporate Governance Principle in the Council's Code of Corporate Governance states that the council will seek and respond to the views of stakeholders and the community. The council will do this by having a policy on consultation and providing access to a range of consultation methods, particularly to those groups not yet reached.
- 4.6 The council's Corporate Communications Strategy 2005 – 2008 states that council consultation and engagement must strive to be effective, meaningful and directly improve services. The Community Engagement Policy will make this clear across the council. Moreover, open and responsive communications are critical to the success of public consultations, as is factual information presented to participants in plain English. The toolkit will provide guidance for any staff responsible for consulting with the public and communications staff preparing or helping to implement communication plans and strategies.

5.0 Legal And Resource Implications

- 5.1 As well as a legal requirement to consult with residents, an assessment of the council's co-ordinated approach towards community engagement will form of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. Residents views should form an integral part of how services are delivered by the council. The council will also aim to create economies of scale by taking a more rational and joined-up approach to consultation and engagement.
- 5.2 The development of consultation activity, along with the implementation of the policy and development of the toolkit, will be led by the consultation officer within Corporate Communications, working with a network of colleagues across the council.

6.0 Conclusions

- 6.1 The council has made a commitment to being part of a city-wide approach to developing a more effective consultation and engagement activities under Vision for Leeds 2004-2020. Therefore, it needs to strengthen its own approach as part of the city-wide strategy.

- 6.2 Positive steps towards addressing outlined weaknesses and maintaining 'excellent' status at the next CPA review and beyond can be taken through the adoption of a Community Engagement Policy and Community Engagement Toolkit - as these will demonstrate intent to improve.
- 6.3 There is a need for a council-wide policy and toolkit to help achieve a consistent approach to community engagement. Colleagues and stakeholders have been consulted during the development of these documents for the purposes of consistency.
- 6.4 The Community Engagement Policy will set out the approach towards consultation and engagement across Leeds City Council.
- 6.5 The Community Engagement Toolkit is a key document that will provide one comprehensive source of information and good practice and can be accessed by everyone across the council internally.

7.0 Recommendations

Executive Board are asked to :

- 7.1 Approve and adopt the principles as set out in the Community Engagement Policy.
- 7.2 Approve and adopt the Community Engagement Toolkit as the key point of reference and good practice for council staff and members when carrying out effective community engagement and consultation.