

Community engagement policy

[final draft]

Produced by the Corporate Communications Team

Leeds City Council

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Community engagement policy

Introduction

This is Leeds City Council's corporate Community Engagement Policy. It sets out the council's approach to community development and falls under the umbrella of Leeds Initiative's overarching city-wide *Framework for Effective Community Participation* - which draws together all the policies developed by the partner agencies from across the city.

The council values all of the people of Leeds and recognises the enormous contribution that individuals and communities make to the development of the city.

Across Leeds many successful and innovative approaches to involve communities in decisions and actions that affect their lives already exist - and are being used. This policy builds on existing good practice and the strong tradition of community engagement in Leeds. It makes sure that the way the council engages reflects the people that live here and influences the priorities and ambitions for the city.

The council celebrates the diversity of the people of Leeds. A commitment to addressing inequality and building a sense of fairness, inclusion and cohesion within all communities underpins this policy. The council has a responsibility to make sure that the views, needs, desires and preferences of everyone including those from vulnerable, minority and not yet reached groups influence policy development.

The council must also ensure that particular groups of people who make a valuable contribution to society such as young people, older people and citizens with a disability are also involved in decision making that affects them.

This policy sets out a framework to ensure that the way the council consults and engages with communities is consistent and co-ordinated, that all the community engagement activities are monitored and evaluated and that all residents have the opportunities to get involved in whatever way they want. It also makes sure that there is a clear link between community engagement and decision making.

Our community engagement policy responds to requirements placed upon the council by central government policy, guidance and performance management systems. The *Vision for Leeds 2004 -2020* makes a commitment to develop a more strategic approach to community engagement. As a partner of Leeds Initiative, the council shares this aspiration and this policy supports the local strategic partnership's *Framework for Effective Community Participation*.

Why do we need a policy?

- To ensure that there is a clear understanding and commitment to a corporate approach to community engagement.
- To establish a strategic approach that will ensure co-ordination, consistency and effective community engagement systems and processes.
- To ensure that community engagement is carried out to the highest possible standards, from the early planning stages right through to feedback and evaluation.
- To increase the number and range of people active in their community and participating in democratic and decision making processes.
- To increase the number of opportunities for everyone to be fully engaged, particularly those who are described as 'not yet reached'.
- To ensure that community engagement activity impacts on decision making and service delivery and that a direct link can be seen between the two.
- To plan and deliver services, strategies and policies that truly reflect the needs of the citizens of Leeds.
- To ensure that we understand the impact of important legislation such as the Local Government Act 1999, the Children Act 2004 and the Disability Discrimination Act 2004.

What is a community?

The council has a responsibility to engage with all stakeholders in how the city is managed. Everyone has a stake in what happens in the future and everyone has a role to play.

Stakeholders can essentially be broken down into the following groups: communities, colleagues, businesses and other agencies and services. This policy focuses on communities. It is important to recognise that communities can be defined in a number of different ways:

a community of places – defined by an area with a physical boundary, such as a housing estate, neighbourhood, village, town, the city centre or area committee, wedge or ward boundaries.

a community of interest – defined by shared experiences such as a particular interest in an activity or project i.e. lobby groups, community associations, representative bodies.

a community of identity - defined by how people wish to identify themselves or how society identifies them e.g. young people, disabled people, ethnic minority groups, the working population, men, women, business leaders etc.

a community of concern – community activists or lobby groups.

a service user or customer community – users or potential users of council services. This covers essential front line services such as waste collection,

highways and recycling or services for specific users such as planning, sports centres or libraries.

No community is made up of people who all think the same, act the same and have the same experience or views. People often belong to more than one community.

What is community engagement?

Community engagement is a broad term used to describe the different ways we communicate, consult, involve and encourage participation from communities.

It is about giving people the opportunity to get information, have a greater say and influence what happens in their community and city. It helps people play a more active role in decision making and delivering improvements for them, their neighbourhood and their city.

Within Leeds we have adopted six different types of community engagement:

- **Researching** needs, priorities and attitudes i.e. *“here’s what we have found out from feedback or survey results”*
- **Providing information** to communities i.e. *“here’s what we are going to do”*
- **Consulting** communities about actions/decisions i.e. *“tell us what you think and we will take that into account when we make the decision”*
- **Involving** communities in shaping plans i.e. *“we want to explore options and decide together”*
- **Acting** together i.e. *“we want to carry out joint decisions together”*
- **Empowering** communities to take responsibility for making decisions or delivering services with our support i.e. *“we can help you achieve what you want”*

This policy recognises that successful community engagement can be achieved where a mix of approaches are employed.

Why is community engagement important?

Community engagement is essential to improving services. It helps to unite local people and communities, builds citizenship and community pride.

By talking to local people, the council can make sure that good quality services are delivered where they are most needed and tailored to local needs. Feedback is also important as this checks that our services are meeting needs and improvements recognised.

Community engagement also breaks down barriers and negative views of organisations. The council will become more open and accessible when communities have a better understanding of how it works and take part in decision making at all levels.

The Leeds City Council perspective

Community Engagement is at the heart of local democracy. Leeds City Council believes that effective engagement must be focused at all levels from local

councillors acting as elected representatives of local communities through to area management and the corporate teams responsible for service delivery.

We need to ensure that we reach out to our diverse communities at all levels. At Leeds City Council we will involve our communities on three levels:

Corporate level engagement: involving all our citizens in city-wide or cross-cutting issues

Service level engagement: issues that impact upon the users of essential or specific services

Community driven engagement : reaching out to communities on thematic issues, or service delivery issues that affect individual communities or neighbourhoods

Corporate engagement and consultation activities

The council undertakes a number of corporate consultation activities about services overall and proposals for change or reviews of their effectiveness. These include:

- **The Citizens Panel** - a body of 2,000 local residents from across Leeds, demographically representative by age, gender, ethnicity and ward.
- **Best Value General Survey** - a major, council-wide, top-line survey on every aspect of the council's services according to national guidelines. The next survey is due in autumn 2006.
- **Annual Survey** – an annual survey to assess local residents' year-on-year perceptions of satisfaction with the council and its services.
- **Corporate consultation groups** - there are corporate groups and forums with representatives from different communities. More information on how to access these groups can be found in the Leeds City Council Community Engagement Toolkit.
- **Children & Young people** – the *Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership* drives the engagement activities with an important group of people ; young people. Advocates, based in each wedge, can create effective links between corporate level activities and community based activities.

Service based activities

Individual services across the council will carry out a range of community engagement activities to find out if local people are satisfied with their services. These range from producing newsletters, a website that gives people who use a service a chance to have their say, household surveys across particular locations or neighbourhoods and face to face surveys.

There is a strong link between service delivery and area management teams - who play a key role by understanding a specific community's needs, helping to prioritise services and liaising with service delivery managers.

Community driven engagement

The community based approach to engagement is driven by:

- **Local councillors** - local councillors are the elected representatives of their communities. By having a base in their communities, they are accessible to people in their constituencies and will get to know what the issues that affect them are. Councillors will develop an understanding of the needs and hopes of local people through engaging with them, providing representation and acting as their 'champion'.
- **Area Management** - the Area Management structure was introduced across Leeds in 2004. Through partnership working and a thematic approach to community engagement, area management staff work towards ensuring that local people have the opportunity to influence the prioritisation of a wide range of services in their area and working with service delivery colleagues.
 - **Area Committees** – area committees drive the Local Action Plan for each of the city's administrative area 'wedges'. In each wedge there are two Area Committees covering the inner and outer wards. The Area Committees are made up of local councillors from within the area and meet at least 6 times a year. All Area Committee meetings are open to the public and welcome views from local people.
 - **District Partnerships**: The five District Partnerships, one in each wedge, have been established to promote a joined-up approach to engagement by bringing the public, private, community and voluntary sectors together in each wedge. They are responsible for guiding the economic, cultural, technological and environmental development of the wedges.

The work of Area Management, the Area Committees and District Partnerships is informed by a variety of engagement activities undertaken directly within their areas; for example ward based forums, open events, fun days, newsletters or youth activities.

Guiding principles

Leeds City Council is committed to carrying out community engagement to a high standard. The following principles have been put in place to help shape and drive successful engagement and are consistent with the standards set out in Leeds Initiative's overarching *Strategy for Effective Community Participation* :

Value, know and involve our communities - everyone has the right to feel they have an investment in and can influence and take an active role in their community.

Support – identify and overcome all barriers to participation, including resources and accessibility.

Plan well - the council is committed to accessing the views of groups in the community and particularly wants to engage with socially excluded groups. Taking a 'one size fits all' approach to this will not work, so the methods used to engage communities need to be planned to make sure that they are appropriate for the area, the community, the issue and the timescales.

Ensure quality of methods - we will reinforce the council's requirements for a high standard of quality within all of our community engagement activities

Improve our services - engagement should be embedded into strategic and service planning. Clear procedures and joined-up working will lead to changes in the decisions that are made, the way that things are done and the services that are delivered so that we can aim to meet expectations.

Co-ordinate and share - the co-ordination of activities across the council is important. We need to ensure that there is no duplication of effort and that different parts of the council learn and benefit from the engagement activities that others are undertaking. Colleagues should look to create joined-up engagement processes by asking others if they can contribute and benefit from co-ownership.

Our Community Engagement Database is one of the key structures that will help us to co-ordinate our engagement activities. We will use the database to register engagement activities, store information about the process and outcome, then detail the resulting action for all of our involvement work with our communities. This information can be accessed by our citizens.

Build capacity - building capacity within communities, infrastructure to facilitate engagement, capacity, skills and systems in the Council.

Communicate well and provide feedback - people have the right to information about opportunities to get involved and to find out about decisions

Evaluate and learn - community engagement should be monitored and evaluated to ensure that it is delivering on the outcomes described in this framework, that it is best practice and that it is fit for purpose.

This Community Engagement Policy was developed during 2005 and is supported by an interactive Community Engagement Toolkit. The toolkit acts as the point of reference for community engagement, providing practical advice and information for Leeds City Council staff on best practice in :

- Our guiding principles of community engagement
- Using your skills to carry out engagement activities
- How we engage with our communities in Leeds
- Communicating with, and reaching out to, diverse groups and communities
- Evaluating activities and learning from the exercise

The Community Engagement Toolkit provides comprehensive information on good practice, information on reaching out to include all communities and quality 'checklists' for use when carrying out activities to drive forward the high levels of quality.

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