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**Report of the Chief Officer, Executive Support**

**Corporate Governance and Audit Committee**

**Date: 29<sup>th</sup> November 2006**

**Subject: Update on the development of corporate consultation and engagement**

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**Electoral Wards Affected:** All

**Specific Implications For:**

Equality and Diversity	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Community Cohesions	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Narrowing the Gap	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

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**Executive Summary**

This report provides an update on progress made on the council's approach to consultation and engagement since the previous report to Corporate Governance and Audit Committee on 27<sup>th</sup> September and responds to the request to bring back an update.

Following the September meeting a number of areas have been investigated and further consultation has been undertaken with members of this committee. It is proposed that a report outlining the work completed to date on the consultation and engagement policy and toolkit is now taken to Executive Board in December, following any further comments from this committee.

The toolkit, available on the intranet, can be regularly be updated and reviewed to reflect changes and developments in tools, techniques and contact details.

## **1.0 Purpose of this report**

- 1.1 This report provides the Corporate Governance and Audit Committee with an update on further progress made on the development of a co-ordinated, corporate approach to consultation and engagement, through the production of a policy and toolkit.
- 1.2 A full list of comments received to date is attached in **Appendix 1**, with details of any changes made.

## **2.0 Background information**

- 2.1 Part of the council's Corporate Communications Strategy 2005 – 2008 includes a commitment to develop a corporate approach to deliver effective consultation and engagement across the authority.
- 2.2 The Corporate Governance Principle in the Council's Code of Corporate Governance also 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 engagement and providing access to a range of consultation and engagement methods, particularly to those groups not yet reached.
- 2.3 The recent White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* introduces a new role for local government, involving strong strategic leadership, effective local partnership working on cross-cutting issues, more information to local people, focusing on their needs with greater community consultation and involvement.

## **3.0 Main issues**

- 3.1 As part of the council's consultation and engagement activities, the following four elements have been developed:
- Corporate engagement policy
  - Corporate engagement toolkit
  - Council engagement network
  - E-co-ordination of community engagement
- 3.2 A copy of both the policy and toolkit has been made available to members of this committee, as well as circulated more widely to all councilors. The policy and toolkit have also been presented to Scrutiny Committee, Children's Services, with particular reference to providing best practice for effectively consulting and engaging with children and young people in the city.

## **4.0 Corporate engagement policy**

- 4.1 The corporate policy articulates the council's approach to consultation and engagement and reflects the council's aspirations and commitment to ensure that the council understands the views, needs, desires and preferences of its citizens, including those from vulnerable, minority and not yet reached groups. It provides a foundation to ensure that the way we consult and engage is consistent, co-ordinated and able to respond to change.
- 4.2 There have been no specific comments received on the policy, other than positive feedback on the need for such a document to be widely communicated and understood by the whole council.

## 5.0 Community Engagement Toolkit

- 5.1 The detail on how consultation and engagement activity will be carried out is provided in significant detail in the toolkit.
- 5.2 A number of comments have been received on the toolkit and changes have been made to reflect these comments. In summary these have covered:
- 5.3 Inclusion of the Cabinet Office's code of practice on consultation - Section 5 on methods of consultation and engagement highlights the guidance for central government which local government are encouraged to follow. The six key criteria recommended by the code of practice are now included in the toolkit with a twelve week period recommended for written consultation.
- 5.4 Clear links on the role of councillors and their input into approaching communities and getting people involved - specific information on engaging with councillors is included within section 4 of the toolkit which articulates the role of councillors but information on member engagement also runs throughout section 5 (what methods should I use?). A copy of the amended section relating to councillors is included in **Appendix 2**.
- 5.5 Improved information relating to contacting councillors - the amendments indicate how to contact relevant councillors directly and how involving councillors can encourage effective local engagement and participation. Running throughout section 5 is a clear indication of how councillors can help inform a consultation and engagement approach, by providing comments and advice on the type of methods that already exist in communities, the most appropriate methods and any historical information on previous consultation or engagement that has taken place.
- 5.6 Town and parish councils have been consulted on the development of this toolkit and are recommended as a key group of consultees - town and parish councils have all been approached to confirm the contact details included in the toolkit but also to be asked to comment how to better articulate their role in community engagement and consultation. A number of comments have been received, with particular reference to the Parish Charter. The toolkit has been amended to make the link to the charter. Given the frequency of parish and town council meetings, it is likely that further comments may be received after the preparation of this report. Any further feedback will be reported at future meetings of this committee.
- 5.7 Improvements to presentation - in addition some comments have been received on presentational aspects including improving sub-heading and relevant photographs, which will be reflected in the final electronic copy of the toolkit.

## 6.0 Council engagement network and communications roll out

- 6.1 A key user group from a network of key consultation contacts has been set up within Leeds City Council to co-ordinate consultation, engagement and market research activity and share information. The purpose of the network is to :
- develop a consistent and co-ordinated approach to consultation and engagement across the council by 'reporting' on departmental and service based activity
  - provide updates on current activity for the purpose of information sharing
  - share best practice, guidance and act as a source of advice
  - aid forward planning

- act as a sounding board and pilot group for the development of new initiatives

6.2 This network will be expanded to include other key officers, including group officers to represent the views of councillors.

6.3 A comprehensive communications and training plan is now being developed to support the adoption and roll-out of the policy and toolkit. This will also consider training for officers for getting the best out of consultation and engagement with community groups and forums. This plan will be essential in ensuring that this policy and toolkit are embedded into the council's services and culture.

## **7.0 Development of a web electronic consultation interface**

7.1 The development of a seamless electronic consultation and engagement interface between the council, its partners and the public is well underway for implementation in the new year. From a customer perspective, this web based programme will contain the following:

- Searchable information store of all consultation and engagement activity and results for the council and its major partners in the city.
- Facility for citizens to express interest in consultations and engagement
- Facility for citizens to participate in consultation and engagement
- Facility for citizens to receive feedback on consultation and engagement
- Facility for citizens to be notified by email, SMS or text on all above facilities.
- Searchable information store of forums, groups and panels
- Potential to set up an e-citizen's panel, e-forums and other functions.

7.2 This will also enable councillors to register for alerts and notification through the database of any consultation or engagement activity within their geographical area and involving services that they are interested in.

## **8.0 Implications for council policy and governance**

8.1 The 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.

8.2 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 and engagement methods, particularly to those groups not yet reached.

8.3 The Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment and the Local Area Agreement also support the importance of consultation and engagement and the increasing need for Leeds to demonstrate a more co-ordinated and significantly improved approach to community engagement.

8.4 The Vision for Leeds 2004 – 2020 makes a commitment to develop a more strategic approach to community engagement. Our policy supports and links in with the LSP's city-wide Community Engagement Strategy.

8.5 The Leeds City Council Corporate Plan 2005/08 makes specific reference to the need to improve our community consultation and engagement. This plan states that

we will improve consultation and engagement in delivering all aspects of delivering services and put a corporate engagement strategy into practice.

- 8.6 The Council Plan for 2004/05 and 2005/06 highlighted the need to improve and develop the council's overall consultation and engagement function as a means of effective two-way communication and involving citizens, groups and communities in decision making as a key improvement area.

## **9.0 Legal and resource implications**

- 9.1 As well as a legal requirement to consult with residents, a co-ordinated approach to activity as part of the assessment under CPA and residents views should form an integral part of how services are delivered by the council.
- 9.2 The development of consultation and engagement activity, along with the implementation of the policy and development of the toolkit will be led by the Head of Corporate Communications, working with colleagues across the council.

## **10.0 Conclusions**

- 10.1 Following a further period of consultation and specific response to issues raised by Corporate Governance and Audit Committee, the toolkit has been amended to reflect feedback received. This is in addition to wider comments received from councillors, officers and partners, making clearer the role of councillors and linking to the charter between the council and town/parish councils.
- 10.2 Further comments will continue to be received, because the toolkit is a PDF we are able to update it immediately. This may particularly apply following regular discussions with parish and town councils at their quarterly forums.

## **11.0 Recommendations**

The Corporate Governance and Audit Committee are asked to:

- 11.1 Comment on and note the progress made on the co-ordination of consultation and engagement to date, and support its presentation to Executive Board for formal approval.