

Community engagement policy

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Leeds City Council

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Introduction

This is Leeds City Council's corporate community engagement policy. It sets out the council's approach to community engagement and links into Leeds Initiative's overarching city-wide *Framework for Effective Community Participation* - which draws together all the community involvement 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 are already in place. This policy builds on existing good practice and the strong tradition of community engagement in Leeds. It ensures 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 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 this policy?

The council's strategic approach to community engagement is driven by:

- the community engagement policy;
- a community engagement toolkit;
- e-enabled community engagement;
- a proactive network group of key council community engagement specialists; and
- consultation and engagement training and development.

This policy sets out our intent and overall approach to community engagement.

Our approach aims to:

- ensure that there is a clear understanding and commitment to a corporate approach to community engagement;
- establish a strategic approach that will ensure co-ordination, consistency and effective community engagement systems and processes;
- ensure that community engagement is carried out to the highest possible standards, from the early planning stages right through to feedback and evaluation;
- increase the number and range of people active in their community and participating in democratic and decision making processes;
- increase the number of opportunities for everyone to be fully engaged, particularly those who are described as 'not yet reached';
- ensure that community engagement activity impacts on decision making and service delivery and that a direct link can be seen between the two;
- plan and deliver services, strategies and policies that truly reflect the needs of the citizens of Leeds; and
- ensure that we understand the impact of important legislation such as the Local Government Act 1999, Local Government Act 2000, the Children Act 2004, Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and the Disability Discrimination Act 2004.

How this policy works

This policy sets out the council's intent and overall approach to engaging with all communities across the city. Community engagement activities will be integrated into individual service plans and action plans - and tailored to suit the needs of the mix of communities or the service provision. Engaging with residents and communities to understand their needs and expectations will now be a fundamental part of service planning and delivery.

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. We need to reach out to all of our diverse communities to ensure that the wide variety of views are taken.

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 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 panel 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 general satisfaction survey on every aspect of the council's services according to national guidelines. The survey is carried out three-yearly (2003, 2006, 2009);
- **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 is found in the Community Engagement Toolkit;
- **Children and young people** – *Childrens Services* drive the engagement activities with young people across the city to meet the recommendations

of the Child Impact Statement for Leeds. Advocates, based in each wedge, and participation experts 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 specific services. Activities will be planned and carried out by individual departmental service teams following key drivers such as:

- **Leeds Statement of Community Involvement** - drives the community engagement and involvement activities with stakeholders about planning and city development issues under the local development framework.
- **Leeds Charter for the participation of children and young people** – sets out the principles for effective consultation and engagement with young people.
- **Leeds Social Services Research Governance Framework** – ensures a high standard of research by health and social care organisations so that people involved in research are well looked after.
- **Leeds Regeneration Plan 2005-2008** - produced by the Narrowing the Gap Executive and sets out to reduce the disparity between the most disadvantaged communities and the rest of the city.
- **Departmental service plans and action plans** – drive the range of consultation and engagement activities in respect of a specific service area. These include service user feedback, customer focus groups, user forums, newsletters, electronic means giving people who use a service a chance to have their say on-line and localised surveys by post, telephone or face-to-face.
- **Quality standards and accreditations** - our Customer Strategy 2005-2008 and accreditations such as Chartermark or Beacon status demonstrate our service quality and drive our engagement activities with citizens and customers to ensure that our services meet their needs.

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 and will get to know what issues affect people. Councillors will develop an understanding of the needs and hopes of local people through engaging with them and providing representation;
- **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 per 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. Through each area's District Partnership Action Plan 2005-2008, they are responsible for guiding the economic, cultural, technological and environmental development of the wedges.

The work of area management and the area committees focuses upon the priorities and key actions of the Area Delivery Plans and is informed by a variety of engagement activities undertaken directly within their areas such as:

- community forums;
- feedback;
- ward based forums;
- open events;
- fun days;
- newsletters;
- youth activities;
- super forums (involving other city partners); and
- meetings with councillors.

The council will also engage with key community-based representative groups and organisations to develop an understanding of the issues that affect citizens and impact upon their neighbourhoods and quality of life.

- **Parish and town councils**
The partnership between Leeds City Council and the parish and town councils has developed the *Parish and Town Council Charter* which sets out the principles for engaging with each other to ensure they are involved in local decision making.
- **Voluntary, community and faith organisations**
The council will maintain key contacts within many voluntary community and faith organisations and use this network to further engage with our diverse range of communities.
- **Community groups and residents associations**
We need to reach out to all communities through community groups such as residents associations, tenants federations, older people's network or neighbourhood watch groups to involve local people in decisions that may affect their neighbourhoods.

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 *Framework 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 socially excluded ones. 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 information 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 to develop the infrastructure, bring about better involvement, deliver change and increase skills through shared knowledge.

Communicate well and provide feedback - people have the right to information detailing involvement opportunities 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 as brought about by this policy.

Co-ordinating our community engagement activities

This community engagement policy was developed during 2006 and is supported by an interactive toolkit and a community engagement and consultation portal and database. These will help to develop our joined-up approach to community engagement.

Community engagement portal and database

The community engagement portal and database will develop our on-line engagement capabilities. It also acts as a comprehensive council-wide information store that also allows our citizens access to information on planned, current and previous consultation and engagement activities.

Community Engagement Toolkit

The toolkit acts as the source of reference for carrying out community engagement activities. It provides guidance, practical advice and information on:

- our guiding principles of community engagement;
- using your skills to carry out engagement activities;
- how we engage with, and reach out to, communities in Leeds;
- communicating with diverse groups and communities;
- evaluating activities and learning from exercises.

It also provides information on good ideas on reaching out to all communities and 'checklists' for activities to drive forward high levels of quality.

For more information, please contact:

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