Community Engagement Strategy

1. Introduction

Effective engagement is central in Aberdeenshire Council's approach to decision and policy making. There is a wide range of community engagement activity taking place across the council which assists with this. This overarching strategy aims to bring a co-ordinated approach to the future engagement activity organised by Aberdeenshire Council.

This strategy will improve our consistency and effectiveness of engagement, ensuring that communities have genuine opportunities to engage with us and be involved in decisions that affect them. At a time where there are increasing demands on public services and decreasing budgets it is essential that communities and service users are engaged in the process of shaping services for the future.

Engagement activities within the council tend to fall within four main areas:

- To improve services
- To meet statutory duties
- To demonstrate our commitment to local democracy
- To show our desire to empower local communities to have more influence on the decisions that affect them.

This strategy demonstrates our commitment of working and engaging with communities, groups and service users to develop and shape services and build capacity towards resilient communities.

This strategy is a way of ensuring we find out what people think and involving them in the process as appropriate. It recognises the importance of helping people to help themselves and the need to make sure that individuals and communities have the opportunity to participate at whatever level they wish to and influence the way we make decisions and deliver services.

The utmost effort must be used in planning engagement activity to ensure it is a genuine, honest and transparent process. When planning any engagement activity – either in a specific area or across all of Aberdeenshire – services should research what is currently taking place and planned to take place.

Aberdeenshire Council's consultation database can be used as a point of reference for specific consultation activity and Community Planning Officers are a key point of contact for engagement activity happening in areas which includes work by other partner organisations (Police, NHS Grampian etc). Any opportunities identified for joint engagement activities should be used as there will be an increasing requirement on all public services to find ways to work engage together with communities.

We need to plan, communicate and involve effectively. This includes managing expectations of participants. When people are taking part it is important that they understand the level of

participation that is available; if not they may become frustrated that the outcome they expected does not happen.

If engagement activity is carried out poorly, or expectations not managed well, it will damage our relationships with communities and have a negative impact on future engagement activities.

We need to clearly demonstrate how the engagement activities have influenced our policies, the decisions taken, and communicate this effectively. People should clearly see how their contributions shape the way we work. Feedback should clearly demonstrate the *'we ask, you said and we have done'* format.

2. Vision

Aberdeenshire Council has a clearly-defined vision: ***Serving Aberdeenshire from mountain to sea – the very best of Scotland***. In order to achieve this we need to work together to be the best area and the best council.

We aim to create an environment where engagement activity is genuine and communities are fully engaged in the process. We will do this by:

o   Being inclusive, ensuring there are opportunities to involve people as it suits them

o   Having a clear purpose to the engagement activity

o   Being clear about responsibilities, support and resources available and the level of involvement offered from the onset

o   Working together and sharing feedback from our engagement activities.

3. Where we would like to be

This strategy will help us to support strong, active and inclusive communities who are informed and involved in decision-making across Aberdeenshire.

By this we mean:

- **Strong communities:** who can form and support their own organisations. We would have a supportive role as and when required
- **Active communities:** Where we support people to improve quality of life in their own communities
- **Inclusive communities:** where all sections of the community feel they have opportunities to be involved in decision making and influence services.

4. How will this will be done?

There is a wide variety of techniques that can be used by services to engage with communities and service users. Before the engagement process starts, it is important to ensure that the purpose of the activity and the level of engagement available is clear to everyone.

There are five main ways, also known as the 'ladder for participation', that will help us work better together. These are:

1) **Keeping you informed:** making sure people know what is happening with services and local events – especially those that that are important to individuals and communities (newsletters, information on the council website)
2) **Asking you what you think:** This is where we will consult with people when there are a number of options for the decision to be made (surveys, focus groups, citizen panel questionnaires, etc.)
3) **Deciding together:** where people become involved in helping us decide on things that we are responsible for delivering (tenant groups)
4) **Acting together:** bringing together community groups and the council to work together to make things better (Planning for Real)
5) **Supporting independent community initiatives:** helping people set up independent community groups to focus on things that are important to them (Community Asset Transfer)

We acknowledge that we cannot achieve this strategy in isolation. Everyone has a part to play to ensure its success including:

- Aberdeenshire residents and communities
- Service users
- Community representatives
- Councillors
- Council staff
- Community and voluntary organisations
- Partner organisations

We need to ensure our approach is appropriate for the engagement planned and tailored to ensure that we engage as widely as possibly within the community/target groups.

The timing of the engagement also needs to be considered – if there are large scale events or during school holidays, for example, you may reduce the number of people who are potentially able to take part. In order to ensure your engagement activity is as accessible as possible to the target audience consider and plan the times as appropriate.

We also understand that people can be reluctant to be involved and this can be due to various factors such as time, interest, not seeing it as genuine engagement or lack of understanding. We need to do as much as reasonably practicable to encourage their participation – we need to demonstrate its importance to them.

5. National Standards of Community Engagement

Aberdeenshire Council has signed up to the National Standards of Community Engagement; a set of principles we are committed to working to while carrying out any engagement activity. These standards are:

1) **Involvement:** we will identify and involve the people and organisations who have an interest in the focus of the engagement

2) **Support:** we will identify and overcome any barriers to participation

3) **Planning:** we will gather evidence of the needs and available resources and use this evidence to agree the purpose, scope and timescales of the engagement and the actions to be taken

4) **Methods:** we will agree and use methods of engagement that are fit for purpose

5) **Working together:** we will agree and use clear procedures that enable participants to work with one another effectively and efficiently

6) **Sharing information:** we will ensure that necessary information is communicated between the participants

7) **Working with others:** we will work effectively with others with an interest with the engagement

8) **Improvement:** we will develop actively the skills, knowledge and confidence of all participants

9) **Feedback:** we will feed back the results of the engagement to the wider communities and agencies affected

10) **Monitoring and evaluation:** we will monitor and evaluate whether the engagement achieves its purpose and meets the national standards of engagement.

Further information and guidance on how to use these standards to ensure best practise throughout your engagement activity are available at http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/national-standards/

6. Engaging with 'Hard to Reach' groups

There are many groups who are referred to as 'hard to reach' as it has been found that they have been identified as having experienced exclusion from engagement activities in the past. There is the question as to whether these groups are hard to reach or if the consulting body has not put in enough effort or thought into how to reach them. We need to ensure that engagement activity is accessible and that we make the efforts to remove barriers to participation.

It is also important to acknowledge that some people do not engage if they are busy or do not see the relevance or importance to them. We need to ensure that engagement activities are accessible and of interest, and that we offer a variety of techniques and communication tools to motivate and encourage people to become involved. There is not a 'one size fits all' solution.

Further information and guidance on engaging with Hard to Reach groups can be found in the Council's Consultation Toolkit.

7. Social Media and Engagement

Social Media describes online tools which allow people, businesses and groups to interact with each other in a public setting. They offer individuals the ability to share information, ideas or opinions, etc. in a variety of formats such as text, images, sound and video. There are communities and networks built through social networking sites and these can be a useful tool for engagement activities.

Currently, the council's use of social media tools is mainly focussed around Twitter, YouTube and when targeting specific campaigns (Safe Drive Stay Alive, elections, etc.) Facebook is used.

Twitter is a free service where people develop networks of contacts and allows the exchange of short bursts of information in up to 140 characters. It gives organisations the opportunity to respond directly to customers, residents etc. and is real time – about what is happening now.

Facebook is a free access social networking site where members can join networks which are created by different communities of interest.

As a council we are keen to promote the use of social media within engagement activity. However, it does need to be planned and managed throughout the process. Before using social media you should contact the Communications Team for advice and read the Social Media guidelines Evaluation and Feedback

The planning stage should involve setting out the process, identifying a clear purpose, clearly setting out the level of involvement and agreeing the outcomes. During the engagement process evidence should be collated that will help you evaluate its effectiveness and the impact.

Evaluation involves assessing if you have achieved the outcomes you set at the beginning of the process and how effective and inclusive the process was. You need to look at what happened, both good and bad, and once the evidence is collated and the outcomes are known you can look at the impact the engagement activity has had.

When evaluating any engagement activity you should consider the following factors:

- o Did everyone understand the objectives set?

- o Were the methods used to engage appropriate?

- o At the end of the engagement process did you have a representative set of views?

- o Was the process transparent and were the schedules adhered to?

- o Were as many barriers to involvement identified and removed as possible?

- o Did you engage with as wide an audience as possible, including groups classed as 'Hard to Reach'?

- o Has the engagement activity led to a change in policy or service delivery?

- o Did your engagement process and activities meet the National Standards for Community Engagement?

- o Did you manage participants' expectations as far as reasonably practical?

- o Can you evidence all of the above?

As noted at the beginning of this strategy managing expectations is a critical part of the engagement process. People are more likely to understand the outcome, even if it not what they hoped for, if this has been done effectively. If the expectations have not been managed well this will need to be taken into consideration when feeding back to participants and the wider community.

The outcome and the reasons for action taken need to be communicated. It is very unlikely that the outcome will meet the expectations of everybody you have engaged with. This is where managing expectations from the beginning of the process and communicating is important. Your feedback needs to show that you took everyone's views into consideration and how the end decision was reached.

Once you have completed your evaluation you need to feed back to several groups. These include participants, the wider community, other teams within the council and the appropriate committees as required. There is a variety of methods available to help you with this, such as the media, social media and the corporate website. These can help communicate to wider audiences who may not have taken part but are interested in the outcomes.

It is worth noting that if you have been upfront at the beginning of the process that you are likely to find that people will be more realistic with their expectations. If it is a lengthy engagement process it will be appropriate to provide feedback at key stages. It is worth considering the following points when developing your feedback:

- o What do people need to know as part of their feedback?

- o When are you going to feed back?

- o How are you going to feed back to all the relevant groups?

9.   Measuring the impact of this strategy

 The impact of this strategy will be monitored by various means, including the monthly Aberdeenshire 450 (Reputation Tracker), which records how well people feel the council takes account of their views. Other tools will be used such as data from the Customer Services Team, feedback from the Citizens' Panel and other relevant research as required.

10.   Other useful Documents

If you are planning engagement activities it is recommended that you refer to the following resources:

- • [Aberdeenshire Council's Consultation Strategy](#)

- • [Aberdeenshire Council's Consultation toolkit](#)

- • [Aberdeenshire Community Planning Council's Youth Engagement Toolkit](#)

- [The National Standards of Community Engagement](#)

For further information please contact Lynne Gravener, Consultation and Engagement Officer, by email: lynne.gravener@aberdeenshire.gov.uk or by phone: 01224 665424