


Agenda Item No:	9	
Committee:	Cabinet	
Date:	15 July 2024	
Report Title:	CONSULTATION STRATEGY 2024-27	

Cover sheet:

1 Purpose / Summary

For Cabinet to consider the approval of the Consultation Strategy 2024-27.

2 Key Issues

- 2.1 Fenland District Council is committed to involving local people in shaping their area and the services they receive.
- 2.2 Fenland already has a good track record of consulting and engaging local people as a normal part of service delivery. We have well-established structures such as a network of Partnership Boards, user/focus groups and forums; we undertake regular customer satisfaction surveys; and we routinely undertake consultation across the full range of council activities.
- 2.3 The Consultation Strategy supports all the Council's core priorities as outlined in the corporate Business Plan. It is also aligned to our Transformation Agenda - Council for the Future.
- 2.4 The Consultation Strategy outlines our approach to consultation, who we will consult with, methods of consultation, our corporate consultation channels, and how we analyse and review our strategy.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 For Cabinet to consider the approval of the Consultation Strategy 2024-27.

Wards Affected	All
Forward Plan Reference	KEY/11APR24/01
Portfolio Holder(s)	Councillor Steve Tierney, Portfolio Holder for Communications, Transformation, Climate Change & Strategic Refuse.
Report Originator(s)	Peter Catchpole, Corporate Director David Wright, Head of Policy & Communications
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Report:

1 BACKGROUND AND INTENDED OUTCOMES

- 1.1 Fenland District Council is committed to involving local people in shaping their area and the services they receive. Consultation is one of the key ways in which we strive to achieve this, providing people who live, work, and visit the district with opportunities to:
- gain greater awareness and understanding of what the Council does.
 - to voice their views and know how they can get involved.
 - to have their views fed into the democratic decision-making process.
- 1.2 Fenland already has a good track record of consulting and engaging local people as a normal part of service delivery. We have well-established structures such as a network of Partnership Boards, user/focus groups and forums; we undertake regular customer satisfaction surveys; and we routinely undertake consultation across the full range of council activities.
- 1.3 This strategy builds on these existing engagement mechanisms and seeks to:
- have clear instructions as to how we will carry out consultations.
 - make note of what we already do well and keep that approach.
 - follow our clear guidance and make sure our actions are checked.
 - promote a consistency of approach throughout the Council.
 - check what we do and show how it was checked.
 - include elected members in the process and clearly demonstrate the important parts they play as the voice of the electorate.
 - have clear guidance as to when we will consult, being sure it is necessary, proportionate and adds value to the process.
 - provide guidance for improving consultation in Fenland.
- 1.4 The Consultation Strategy supports all the Council's core priorities as outlined in the corporate Business Plan – Communities, Environment, Economy and Quality Organisation. It is also aligned to our Transformation Agenda - Council for the Future.
- 1.5 The Strategy is a key part of our Customer Service Excellence (CSE) accreditation. It enables us to shape and continually improve our services, and that consultees are informed of consultation feedback and resulting action taken.
- 1.6 The Consultation Strategy outlines our approach to consultation, who we will consult with, methods of consultation, our corporate consultation channels, and how we analyse and review our strategy.

2 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 Cabinet is being asked to approve the Consultation Strategy 2024-27 because it will provide a structure for all future consultations. It will also aim to ensure that the Council runs effective and transparent consultations.

3 CONSULTATION

- 3.1 N/A

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 No alternative options were considered as the Council has made an ongoing commitment to produce a Consultation Strategy.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Legal Implications

- 5.2 There are no specific legal considerations connected with the content of this report. Where legislation prescribes a specific consultation requirement/process this will be adhered to.

5.3 Financial Implications

- 5.4 N/A

5.5 Equality Implications

- 5.6 The Council has a wide variety of stakeholder groups it consults with. Each group has different characteristics and needs to be consulted with in different ways appropriate to their needs.

We use various methods of consultation depending on the subject matter, but where necessary alternative methods are utilised to ensure there is an inclusive approach.

6 SCHEDULES

Appendix 1 – Consultation Strategy 2024-27.

Introduction

Fenland District Council is committed to involving local people in shaping their area and the services they receive.

In order to provide high-quality, cost-effective services that meet the needs of our local residents, businesses, and visitors, we need to understand what people value most and involve them in conversations about the things that affect them.

Consultation is one of the key ways in which we strive to achieve this, providing people who live, work, and visit the district with opportunities to:

- gain greater awareness and understanding of what the Council does.
- to voice their views and know how they can get involved, particularly through and alongside their elected representatives.
- to have their views fed into the democratic decision-making process.

However, whilst we acknowledge the importance of consultation, we understand that excessive consultation can lead to disengagement or a perception that resources would be more effectively utilised in actual implementation rather than repetitive questioning. As such, our objective is to conduct meaningful consultation exercises that prioritise quality over quantity.

A common critique of organisational consultations is when they fail to provide room for a comprehensive spectrum of options or appear to guide the consultee toward a predetermined outcome, using language, selectively chosen data, or insufficient contextual information, among other persuasive tactics. We aim to circumvent these pitfalls by fostering an environment that allows for a diverse range of opinions and expressions, ensuring that all arguments are considered, and all ideas are openly discussed to inform our decisions thoroughly.

Fenland already has a good track record of consulting and engaging local people as a normal part of service delivery. We have well-established structures such as a network of Partnership Boards, user/focus groups and forums; we undertake regular customer satisfaction surveys; and we routinely undertake consultation across the full range of council activities. We also have strong links with our partners the Police, Public Health, NHS, the business sector and numerous community and volunteer groups.

This strategy builds on these existing engagement mechanisms and seeks to:

- have clear instructions as to how we will carry out consultations.
- make note of what we already do well and keep that approach.
- follow our clear guidance and make sure our actions are checked.
- promote a consistency of approach throughout the Council.
- check what we do and show how it was checked.
- include elected members in the process, both in the consultation and in the interpretation of the results, and clearly demonstrate the important part they play as the voice of the electorate.
- have clear guidance as to when we will consult, being sure it is necessary, proportionate and adds value to the process.
- provide guidance for improving consultation in Fenland.

Background: Local and National Context

Local context

The Consultation Strategy supports all the Council's core priorities as outlined in the corporate Business Plan. These are:

- **Communities** – supporting our ageing population, young people and vulnerable members of our community. Promoting health and wellbeing for all, while respecting personal autonomy and personal lifestyle choices.
- **Environment** – delivering a high performing refuse, recycling and street cleansing service. Working with partners and the community on projects that improve the street scene and reduce crime.
- **Economy** – attracting new businesses, jobs and opportunities whilst supporting existing businesses. Promoting and enabling housing growth, economic growth and regeneration, as well as lobbying for infrastructure improvements.
- **Quality Organisation** – ensuring we are running an effective organisation with good customer service and an empowered workforce. Pursuing transformation and commercial opportunities.

The strategy is also aligned to our Transformation Agenda - Council for the Future. Our Business Plan and Transformation Service Reviews are available to view in full at: fenland.gov.uk/businessplan

Fenland District Council is Customer Service Excellence (CSE) accredited, a national standard for delivering excellent customer service. A key element of this accreditation is ensuring that consultation is integral to shaping and continually improving our services, and that consultees are informed of consultation feedback and resulting action taken.

The Council recognises its community leadership role and the role of councillors as the elected representatives of local people. Consultation is seen as complementing the local knowledge brought by elected members and enhancing the democratic role of the Council.

Fenland District Council is part of the Cambridgeshire Compact, which is a partnership agreement between statutory bodies and the voluntary and community sector in Cambridgeshire. The agreement sets out a framework for effective consultation, representation and partnership working to achieve common goals and outcomes for the benefit of the local community.

National context

Consultation has been at the core of the local government modernisation agenda for a number of years. Developing and enhancing involvement is seen as vital for supporting the legitimacy of local government, developing community leadership, and improving service delivery. There is also a range of legislation which impacts how local authority consultation should be carried out.

Most importantly, all councils are under a Duty of Best Value to “make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”¹. In addition, each council

¹ Section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 (as amended)

is under a Duty to Consult² with representatives of a wide range of local people when reviewing service provision. Authorities must consult representatives of council taxpayers, those who use or are likely to use services provided by the authority, and those appearing to the authority to have an interest in any area within which the authority carries out functions. Authorities should include local voluntary and community organisations and businesses in such consultation.

The Localism Act 2011 also includes the involvement of residents, of which a key part is the new set of rights for communities – the right to challenge, to bid and to build. This means providing more opportunities for local people to get involved and influence decisions that affect how their area develops.

The Consultation Strategy will ensure the Council continues to strengthen involvement and engagement particularly at a local level and thereby also complying with the Duty to Consult.

Our Approach

How Fenland District Council consults with the public.

Core objectives

In order for us to make decisions about services, priorities, and performance, it is vital that we have accurate and reliable information derived from public consultation and engagement. To help us achieve this, our Consultation Strategy identifies eight consultation objectives:

Objective 1: Necessary and of value

Before undertaking any consultation, it's important we make sure that it is a necessary activity and adds value to the decision-making process. Consultations can be time-consuming to run, while asking residents for unnecessary information can be a waste of time and resources, as well as being annoying for the people asked to take part. We will consult when there is a statutory requirement, and we are legally required to do so, or when there is substantial added value to do so. Decisions on when to consult outside of statutory requirements and in what manner will be informed by advice from the appropriate Portfolio Holder and with input from other democratically elected members.

Objective 2: Strategic and co-ordinated

We will improve the planning and coordination of consultation in order to:

- improve methodology
- avoid duplication
- ensure effective use of resources
- reduce 'consultation fatigue'
- provide value for money

Objective 3: Clear and consistent

We will provide clear guidance and ensure best practice principles are consistently implemented for consultation activities undertaken by the Council. We will explain why consultation is being carried out and how feedback and results will be used.

Objective 4: Open and transparent

² Section 3(2) of the Local Government Act 1999

Our consultations will be open and transparent about issues, proposals, and developments to help provide meaningful engagement and improve public trust in the consultation process. Consultations will not try to steer consultees towards certain preferred conclusions or decisions.

Objective 5: Well planned and timely

We will ensure consultees are given adequate time to prepare their response. This will vary depending on the time of year and the detail of response that is being sought. Sufficient time will be given so consultation results can be effectively analysed and fed directly into the decision-making process.

Objective 6: Customised and innovative

For consultation to be effective, we will ensure there is a customised approach that will build on our relationship with residents and grow our audience reach. We will also make best use of new and imaginative ways to consult that offer opportunities for more people to have their say and encourage high quality engagement.

Objective 7: Inclusive and appropriate

We will ensure that all communities are supported and encouraged to participate effectively, through the use of appropriate research and consultation methods, including harder to reach audiences and those seen as 'seldom heard'.

Objective 8: Follow-up action

We will carefully consider the outcomes of consultation, analyse responses promptly and objectively, and ensure that they are used, together with research, evidence and other considerations, to inform policy and decision-making. We will also ensure appropriate feedback mechanisms are in place. We will always provide feedback through our Consultations webpage: www.fenland.gov.uk/consultations

Gunning Principles

The Council's approach will also uphold the principles of consultation (known as the Gunning Principles):

- Consultation must be at a time when proposals are still at a formative stage. A final decision has not yet been made, or predetermined, by the decision makers.
- There is sufficient information provided, including the reasons for proposals, to allow for intelligent consideration and response. The information provided must relate to the consultation and must be available, accessible and easily interpretable for consultees to provide an informed response.
- There is adequate time for people to consider a proposal, participate and respond. The length of time given for consultee to respond can vary depending on the subject and extent of impact of the consultation.
- Conscientious consideration must be given to the consultation responses before a decision is made. Decision-makers should be able to provide evidence that they took consultation responses into account.

Further information on the internal approach undertaken by the Council's Communications Team to ensure all consultations meet the above objectives and principles can be found in Appendix 1.

Consultation and Equalities

Understanding the needs of Fenland's diverse community and ensuring an inclusive approach to consultation is a key aspect of the objectives, quality standards and principles set out within this strategy. It underpins the ethos of Fenland District Council as well as being a requirement of the Equality Framework for Local Government and ensures compliance with legislative requirements as laid out in the Equality Act 2010.

To help assess whether planned consultation activities are fully inclusive, an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) can be undertaken. An EIA helps to identify whether the implementation of a new policy or initiative or operation of a current policy, function or service affects different people or groups in different ways, thereby ensuring possible negative consequences are either eliminated or mitigated.

Further guidance on how to ensure consultation activities are inclusive can be sought from the Council's 'Equality Champions', Traveller and Diversity Manager or the Communications Team.

Who we will consult with

We have a variety of stakeholder groups with which we will consider undertaking consultation, depending on the issues involved. Each group has different characteristics and so will need to be consulted with in different ways appropriate to their needs. Some of the main stakeholder groups are:

- residents of Fenland – both directly and indirectly through their local councillors who have been elected to represent them
- service customers and users
- elected councillors
- members of staff
- people who work, study or visit Fenland
- non-users and potential users of services
- businesses and business organisations
- interest and pressure groups, i.e. tenant and resident associations
- voluntary and community groups
- town and parish councils
- communities and neighbourhoods
- groups of people defined by a common factor such as age, disability, gender, ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation
- hard to reach groups such as people experiencing homelessness, EU citizens, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, older people
- public and private sector stakeholders
- Partnerships, panels, and forums
- Partner organisations
- government organisations

In addition, there is a pivotal role in facilitating and building consultation opportunities for local councillors, local partnerships, panels and forum groups, town and parish councils and the voluntary and community sector, which are outlined in this section.

Local councillors

Elected councillors have an essential role providing representation and a voice for local people; providing information and acting as a channel of communication; they also act as powerful advocates for individuals and as champions for users of local services. Elected

councillors' unique community leadership role provides them with a major input into the consultation process. Their role in consultation goes further than the use of results to inform decision-making. In addition to roles as ward councillors, where they need to manage differing and sometimes conflicting interests, their local knowledge of relevant issues, circumstances and groups can be invaluable to ensuring comprehensive and effective engagement is carried out. It is essential that elected councillors are aware of and involved at an early stage in the development of consultation activities, particularly where their ward is affected.

Town and parish councils

Town and parish councils, also known as local councils, are the statutory bodies known as the first tier of Local Government and are represented nationally by the National Association of Local Councils, and its county-level associations. They are independent from Fenland District Council, but an active partnership of joint working is essential to deliver local accountability and responsiveness.

Local councils have a unique and key role to play in consultation. More broadly, they exercise a general consultative role of behalf of local people: for instance, they are statutory consultees in all planning matters. They are also the 'eyes and ears' of their local communities, relaying the opinions and views of local people to higher tiers of local government, and a key partner in assessing the needs of its community and the provision of services to meet those needs.

It is essential that local councils are consulted where appropriate on issues that affect their area and that they are given adequate time – bearing in mind each council's cycle of meetings – to respond. We will provide briefing sessions/workshops where practical for local councils on complex issues, have regard to the views of local councils when making decisions and provide feedback on the results of consultations.

The voluntary and community sector

We work closely with and represent many local community groups and charities which have a varied and key role to play in consultation and community engagement – from being a consultee directly to acting as a liaison point between the council and local organisations working with particularly marginal or vulnerable groups.

Methods of consultation

The Council will use various methods of consultation depending on the subject matter, the level of engagement required, and the type of stakeholders we are trying to reach, and in some cases, this will require a multi-method approach.

In summary, these methods may include:

- online surveys
- postal surveys
- telephone surveys
- face-to-face surveys
- web forms
- social media – Facebook/Twitter/YouTube
- feedback through 3Cs system
- consultation events
- community engagement events
- community events, i.e. Golden Age
- consultative workshops
- focus groups
- customer feedback forms
- customer journey mapping

When selecting which consultation method is the most appropriate to use, the Council will consider a number of factors including accessibility, cost, effectiveness, equality and timeliness.

On request, and within reasonable limits such as cost and timeliness, the Council will provide Individuals or organisations with an alternative method of consultation where the chosen method prevents them from being able to participate. For example, providing on request an easy read version of a survey for a resident who has learning difficulties, or for an internet survey, to provide a paper survey to residents who are unable to access the internet.

The Council's Communications Team can provide guidance on how to design a consultation that ensures the most appropriate methods and formats are used.

Partnerships, panels, and forums

There are a number of partnership groups, panels and forums in Fenland that support and consult with service users. They all have varying roles and responsibilities but ultimately provide local people in Fenland with an opportunity to feedback their views and improve how services are being delivered in the district. These groups have a notable role to play in service-specific consultations, and at times corporate consultations, and will be used to specifically encourage comment on relevant service changes.

Examples of these groups include:

- Fenland Community Safety Partnership
- Fenland Diverse Communities Forum
- Fenland Health & Care Forum
- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Resilience Forum
- Hereward Community Rail Partnership
- Private Landlords Forum

Other ways to get involved and have a say

Other ways people can get involved and have a say include: contacting (write to, email or telephone) relevant Council officers or departments; submitting a Freedom of Information Request; contacting their local councillor or attending their councillor's surgery; attending Council meetings or committees; or by submitting a petition.

Corporate consultation channels

Fenland District Council has developed a network of corporate consultation mechanisms for local people to get involved. These are outlined below and are in addition to those discussed in section 5.

Fenland District Council website

Council websites are an important communication and consultation channel for local authorities. In 2020, Fenland District Council relaunched its website (www.fenland.gov.uk) giving residents and businesses a vast array of information about public services in the district and how to access them. Residents and business can apply for services, get the latest news and report issues such as fly-tipping and graffiti. The website has the Council's dedicated Consultations webpage (www.fenland.gov.uk/consultations) clearly visible on the homepage, where residents can find out about past and current consultations; and take part in online consultations.

Consultation Forward Plan

The Council has a Forward Plan of all consultations planned for the year ahead, with a number of periodic consultation and engagement activities undertaken. These include:

- Customer Satisfaction Survey (annual)
- Business Plan and Budget Consultation (annual)
- Garden Waste Satisfaction Survey (quarterly)
- Refuse and Recycling Customer Satisfaction Survey (quarterly)
- Community Safety Survey (quarterly)

Corporate social media accounts

Social media is a valuable tool for the public sector; with 84% of the UK population using social media, it is vital that Fenland District Council has a social media presence. It can support the delivery of the Council's priorities, enhance the reputation of the Council and embed it in the online community, and offer excellent customer service. Strategic use of social media will ensure good engagement with residents, and wider sharing of information on services most important to customers. It will also give local communities greater influence, empowering residents to get involved in the Council and their community in a way that's convenient for them.

Social media can be an effective, cost-efficient way to obtain genuine feedback, especially from harder to reach audiences and will be used by the Council to enable local people to help shape proposals that will affect the services they use and deliver or the areas where they live and work. It will help us to hear the voices of those most affected and hear a balance of views.

Analysis/next steps

Fenland District Council is committed to strengthening how it informs, consults, involves, and empowers its community.

As part of our ongoing improvement corporately, across all services, and in conjunction with our partners, we will need to demonstrate through the normal course of business that:

- we understand the needs and interests of our local community
- we use this understanding to ensure information, consultation, involvement and empowerment opportunities are provided and that they target the right people and are accessible
- consideration is given to the appropriate level of engagement
- we adhere to our objectives and the principles of consultation outlined in Section 3.1, and 3.2, while taking into account wider factors (statutory guidance, resources and political priorities)
- local people feel that there are sufficient opportunities to get involved and they know how to access them if they want to. Our community should also recognise that the Council's policies reflect this involvement and those services are accessible, responsive and tailored to the different needs of our local communities.

We will regularly review the Communications Strategy to ensure that it reflects current good consultation practice and considers local community need.