

South Holland District Council Community Engagement Strategy

Executive Summary

This is a strategy for engaging with the communities of place and communities of interest in South Holland. It forms an important part of our overall approach to communication, corporate planning, community leadership and meeting the new duty to involve from 1st April 2009.

The rural nature and dispersed population of South Holland raises issues in finding ways of engaging with individuals and communities. The strategy is designed to match the needs and preferences of our communities, which have been consulted on early in the process of developing this strategy. It will ensure that all sections of the community are fairly represented, have opportunities to participate and are involved in decisions that affect them.

The strategy takes into account the context for community engagement in South Holland and in Lincolnshire as well as emerging national policy. The action plan for the strategy sets out a programme of work to deliver nine key outcomes. It sets out activities in three main areas:

1. Providing information:

Empowered communities are informed communities. This strategy sets out how we will ensure that people have the information they need and are aware of issues and plans that may affect them, so that they can access services, make informed choices and know how to get involved if they wish.

2. Consulting and encouraging participation:

The strategy sets out how consultation will be used when priorities are being developed and when key policies are being formed and there are choices about options and details. There will be regular consultation with customers of council services, co-ordinated so as to avoid duplication and consultation fatigue, which will be used to inform service improvement, deliver services that meet community needs and aspirations and enable people to influence outcomes.

3. Empowering individuals and communities:

This strategy sets out the opportunities people have for a deeper level of involvement in influencing decisions that affect them and their communities, including equipping them to develop and implement their own community plans. The action plan sets out how these opportunities will be further developed.

The strategy will ensure that we empower individuals and communities and promote equality through delivering a consistent approach and setting clear standards for community engagement in South Holland.

Our Vision for Engagement

The Council's vision for community engagement is for all citizens to feel that the local public services act on their concerns and that they are:

- well informed about the Council – its services, how to contact their elected member and how to make a complaint
- satisfied that they have meaningful and worthwhile opportunities to express their views to the Council; and
- able to influence local issues which impact their quality of life

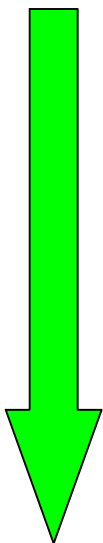
Introduction

Community engagement is the process whereby the Council connects with people and communities to create empowerment opportunities. The term is used to embrace a spectrum of activities which support the two-way dialogue between the Council and its citizens; ranging from providing information and letting people know what is happening to providing the ways and means for people to become involved and empowered to influence decisions that affect them and their communities.

This strategy is therefore about the way we communicate information to our citizens, the way in which we listen and respond to their views and the way in which we enable people to influence the Council. The strategy has been developed from speaking directly with community groups to best understand people's preferences on how, and on what, they wish to be engaged. It is also informed by examining best practice and national guidelines on community leadership and empowerment.

This is not the beginning of community engagement by South Holland District Council. We have informed, consulted and involved people in many ways before, for example, through:

Information Giving and Awareness



- Information and access to services via our website
- The regular news bulletin *South Holland Now* and targeted publications such as *Housing Matters*, the tenants' newsletter
- The published *Statement of Community Involvement* for land planning purposes
- The Tenants' Compact
- Webcasting meetings, including interactive opportunities to contribute to key debates
- Asking people for their views - consulting on our key policies and spending plans
- Discussing issues and priorities directly - road shows, workshops and events around the district
- Working with community groups and communities of interest
- Collaboration - Parish Planning and development of a rural compact
- Devolution - transferring ownership and control of assets and resources to parish councils

Community Empowerment

This strategy replaces our current consultation strategy. It sets a new framework for engaging with our citizens as part of the journey of continuing to improve and responding to their rising expectations. We recognise that the way the Council leads on and supports engagement is vital in delivering this in a fair and equitable way.

The South Holland Context

South Holland is a rural district of approximately 83,000 residents living in 47 towns and villages. Spalding is the largest settlement and focus of administration with 26,000 residents. The market towns of Holbeach, Long Sutton and Crowland together with Sutton Bridge and Donington are home to a further 22,000 residents. Beyond this, 42 per cent of the population lives in the network of smaller villages and parts of the district in which the population density is considerably less than 1 person per hectare and the communities are rural and dispersed.

The residents of South Holland are represented by 37 District Councillors who play a central role in decision making as the democratically elected representatives for their communities. They also work within those communities to empower individuals and community groups. This has helped us to improve the services we and our partners provide, and yet roughly one third of local people sampled¹ do not feel they can influence decisions affecting their local area.

The social make-up of the area has changed considerably in recent years with the arrival of significant numbers of retired older people and migrant workers who have come here for employment, bringing with them different expectations. Just over 20 per cent of the population is of pensionable age, 18 per cent is under 16 and the trend is towards an aging population. Whilst less than 3 per cent of the population is from ethnic groups other than White British, 49 different languages are spoken. This adds to the challenge of involving dispersed, working rural communities in shaping what happens where they live. Technology offers alternatives but not everyone has access to a computer and Broadband does not yet reach all parts of South Holland.

South Holland is part of the Lincolnshire Pathfinder project and Sustainable Community Strategy, from which is emerging a strategic and co-coordinated approach to community empowerment across the county. This strategy is consistent with the emerging countywide approach.

National Policy Context

The quality of public services delivered by local government has improved considerably in recent years. Despite this, public satisfaction and voter turnout has declined. Improved community engagement is part of the Government's plans to address this.

The Local Government White Paper 2006 set the framework for devolution to local government and communities. At the heart of this is strengthening the role of councillors as democratically mandated leaders and engaging and empowering local people so that they can influence services and policies that have an impact on their quality of life.

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and Statutory Guidance (2008) introduced the duty to inform, consult and involve.

¹ Source: BVPI General User Satisfaction Survey 2006

The Empowerment White Paper 2008 *Communities in Control; Real People, Real Power*, sets the scene for citizens

- accessing information
- having a say
- influencing
- challenging & seeking redress
- standing for office
- taking ownership and control

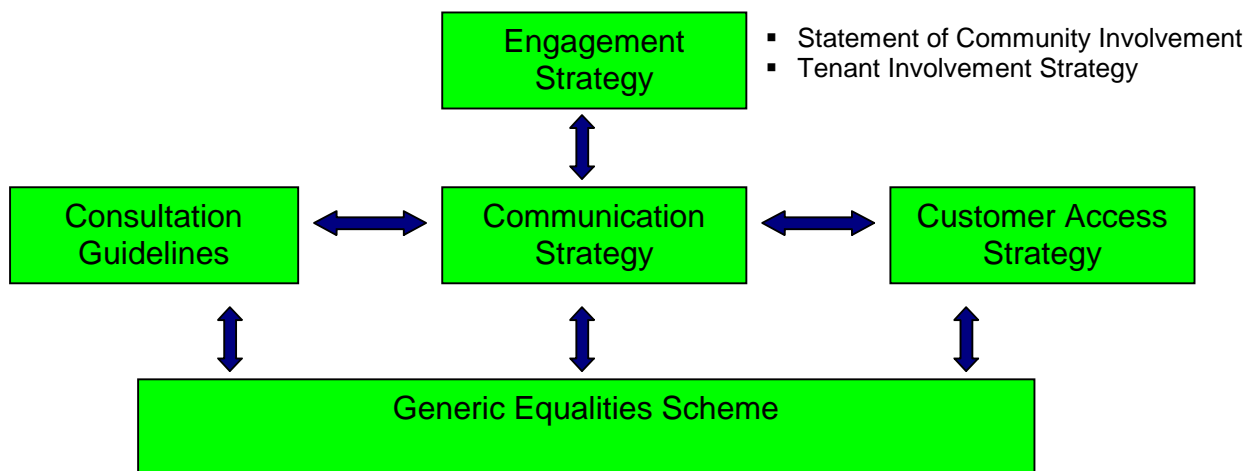
Community engagement is part of the wider agenda to involve local people in shaping their communities, influencing key decision-makers and, through this, to improve public services and satisfaction.

The aims of the strategy

1. To keep all citizens well informed how to access the Council's Services and what Service Standards to expect.
2. To capture customer feedback and use it to improve Council Services
3. To ensure that the Council's plans and policies are developed, scrutinised and approved following suitable consultation with the community.
4. To enable local communities to better influence and possibly control matters which have a direct bearing on the quality of life of that community.
5. To enable citizens to better hold the Council to account.
6. To strengthen the role of elected members as community leader, advocate and champion of community issues and of their accountability as the elected representative of the community.
7. To increase the interest in local democracy and increase voter turnout and the level of interest in participation.
8. To build community cohesion and integration
9. To build trust between the Council and the citizens of South Holland

Links to our Corporate Policy Framework

This strategy provides an overarching framework which supplements and supports a co-ordinated approach to communication, engagement and customer service, with specific reference to harder-to-reach groups.



This strategy also supports the delivery of the Council's Corporate Plan, which sets out the long term outcomes we want to deliver and actions for the next five years. This is underpinned by informing and involving local people on improving services and outcomes for local communities.

Challenges in achieving the strategy aims:

Hard to reach groups

It is important that we inform, consult and involve all sectors of the community who may be affected by the actions and decisions which the Council takes. Unless care is taken we may not sufficiently capture the views of important groups of people within our community. This would include disabled people, migrant workers, Gypsies and Travellers, young people and older people. We have and will continue to speak with these groups about how they would prefer us to engage with them.

This strategy was impact assessed as it was being developed and all future engagement exercises will be subject to an *Equalities Impact Assessment*. Also, the locations where we engage, the buildings used, the support provided and ways of communicating will recognise the constraints of living in a rural area and take into account the different needs of those who we will be engaging with.

We will continue to use existing forums such as the Youth Council, older people's forums, access and disability groups, migrant worker networks and faith groups to reach these harder to reach communities. The Rural Action Zone² Commission, which reported on community cohesion issues in the area in 2008, recommended that the channels for engaging with our migrant worker population need to be improved, and this will happen. This will continue to build on work that began through the *Dynamics of Migrant Labour in South Lincolnshire* research (2006).

Co-ordinating consultation

The Council has the need to consult with its community on a range of issues and services throughout the year. Many of our partner organisations in the public sector have similar needs. We will co-ordinate consultations and produce an annual consultation plan with the aim of preventing consultation overload within our community and for more efficient working.

Apathy and trust

We wish to improve the trust between the Council and our citizens and to encourage a greater willingness to get involved in community and civic affairs. The engagement strategy will assist by ensuring;

- Published feedback on the outcome of all consultation exercises showing how the consultation has made a difference
- Clear and open communication of information which citizens require in order to get involved
- Meaningful opportunities within local communities to influence and have devolved to them services which impact their quality of life

² The Rural Action Zone is a partnership of service providers and organisations working in South Holland to deliver long term outcomes for relating to quality of life and well-being in the area.

The strategic approach

In each of the three delivery strands for community engagement the Council will establish a set of mechanisms which can be utilised according to the needs of any specific intervention.

1. Providing information

The infrastructure for providing information includes;

- The SHDC web site, with links to other useful websites
- Information points around the district
- *South Holland Now* magazine published four times a year
- *Housing Matters* – tenants newsletter
- Use of local media – newspapers, radio and TV
- Topic specific guidance, leaflets and mailings
- Webcasting of meetings and key debates
- Member blogs
- Exhibitions
- Presentations

This communication infrastructure will be used to inform on such matters as available services and how to access them, service standards, service performance, promoting health, environment, safety, community cohesion and campaigns such as benefits take up, as well as emerging issues and, importantly, feedback from consultations.

2. Consulting

The infrastructure for consulting, involving and participation includes;

- Established special interest forums for older people, access and disability groups, young people, faith groups and migrant workers
- A maintained database of stakeholders
- A citizens' "e" reference group
- Sampling – postal and web surveys and market research approaches, including the two-year *Place Survey*
- Developing contact with working people and deeply rural communities
- A defined area on the Councils web site
- Topic based consultations – print & web based
- Parish Councils and the Spalding Town Forum
- The South Holland Youth council
- Neighbourhood panels
- Elections
- Public meetings and discussions
- The Tenants' group

This consultation infrastructure will be used in the early stages of developing all key policies and plans to inform the proposal. Examples would be the corporate plan (including setting priorities), the financial plan, housing strategy, cultural strategy, street scene strategy and other key place-shaping

strategies. The infrastructure will then be used to further consult on the proposals.

Thus each of these key documents which will shape the future of South Holland will go through a two stage process:



Stage 1 - *What are your views?*



Stage 2 - *Have we captured your views correctly in our proposed strategy and how we plan to implement it?*

Consultation on the *Local Development Framework* and associated planning policies to support and steer the future development of South Holland will follow the *Statement of Community Involvement* adopted for this purpose.

There will be regular consultation of customers of Council services which will be used to inform service improvement.

3. Local Empowerment

The infrastructure for local empowerment includes;

- Devolution of functions to Parish Councils
- Parish Planning/community planning
- Piloting community engagement through Portfolio Holders of Place
- Links with community groups in towns, villages and neighbourhoods
- Community petitions, which can be presented to a meeting of the Council with the opportunity to address the Council on the issue

Parish Councils are offered the opportunity to have certain functions normally provided by the Council devolved to them. This has been taken up in parts of the district in respect of grounds maintenance, street cleaning, public conveniences and the transfer of a cemetery. This offer will be further developed and encouraged.

We have appointed Portfolio Holders of Place for the communities of Holbeach and Donington, each with a small devolved budget, who are using supported Parish Planning to engage with the community, other public sector providers and local businesses. This is to assist in delivering improvements and aspirations which have been chosen and prioritised by the community. Subject to the evaluation of these pilots, the intention is to introduce this approach to other communities.

We will develop proposals for introducing Government requirements to introduce participatory budgeting and encourage the transfer of community assets to Parish Councils and community organisations. In addition, we will develop the Councillor 'Call for Action' and set up citizens' juries to mediate or resolve tough local issues and strengthen accountability.

Outcomes and Monitoring

We will monitor the success of the strategy by reporting on the following measures of outcomes and setting appropriate targets.

1. % of people who feel well informed about public services (place survey)
2. % of people who know how to get involved in local decision making (place survey)
3. % of people who feel they can influence decisions in their local area (NI 4)
4. Perception of value for money SHDC provides (place survey)
5. Overall satisfaction with the local area (NI 5)
6. Satisfaction with the way SHDC runs things (place survey)
7. % of people who feel local public services act on the concerns of local residents (place survey)
8. % of people who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood (NI 2)
9. Civic participation in the local area (NI 3)

Evaluating our approach

Through understanding how effective the strategy is, we will be able to better tailor and improve the Council's approach. We will evaluate our engagement processes as the strategy unfolds and as the national policy context and guidelines develop. Improving the quality of the evidence is a continuing process. Better local evaluation processes are needed to increase understanding of how community engagement impacts on the outcomes. We will evaluate the strategy through;

- Seeking feedback from participants and stakeholder groups to gauge the extent to which we have reached the target audience, particularly harder to reach groups
- Developing an evaluation framework
- Measuring the achievement of the intended outcomes
- Assessing the cost of community engagement against the outcomes
- Comparing our approaches against good practice elsewhere

The Council's performance scrutiny panel will be supported to evaluate the effectiveness of engagement exercises and to scrutinise performance against these measures.