

# Charter for Public Participation



This Charter provides a short statement on how local people can get involved:

- in Council meetings and influence decisions; and
- in the development of policies, plans and services that affect them.

The intended audience is all those who live, work or study in the Borough, as well as all Council staff.

## I. Introduction

- I.1 Healthy local democracy goes well beyond people voting in Borough Elections every four years. Local people rightly expect to have a say on things that affect their communities, to help shape the decisions made by the Council and to contribute to the development of services, plans and programmes alongside Council officers and local councillors. Furthermore they want some confidence that their contributions can and will influence these things.
- I.2 The Council delivers a wide range of services and takes many decisions, most of which are quite routine and don't impact local people in any significant way. A few, however, have a potentially significant impact in one way and another. The Council is keen to hear how local people wish to be engaged or involved and are eager to listen to local people and other stakeholders before reaching a decision. It acknowledges that such public participation can often deliver more sustainable outcomes: local people, after all, are more likely to support decisions on which they've had an input.
- I.3 That said, it's the Council that has the legal responsibility for the provision of local authority services. It can and will listen, hear, engage, and involve – but ultimately it's the democratically-elected Council which has to, by law, weigh up all relevant considerations and take these decisions. In many instances, these decisions will clearly reflect the wishes of local people, but at times the Council may have to take difficult decisions that will not satisfy everybody. However it will always take account of local views and make decisions that it considers are in the best interests of the Borough as a whole.

- 1.4 The diagram in the Appendix shows a range of ways that can and will be used to facilitate public participation, each of which the Council will use as and when appropriate (see examples provided).

## **2. Our Values and Behaviours**

- 2.1 In 2018 the Council adopted the *Twelve Principles of Good Governance* (now incorporated into [Part One of the Council's Constitution](#)) and in 2019 adopted new organisational Values and Behaviours which include commitments to:

- put local people at the heart of decision making in everything we do;
- listen to others and value the personal experiences of people in our communities and each other; and
- let people know how we are doing and communicate why and how decisions have been made

## **3. Involving local people in issues that impact on the community**

- 3.1 In terms of public participation, our Values and Behaviours mean that we:

- accept the principle that those impacted upon by major proposals or actions should be given an opportunity to be involved in advance;
- will listen to views and opinions and, where there is clear local consensus, take this into account in Council decisions;
- acknowledge that the community is a valuable, often untapped, resource, and that drawing upon this resource through public participation can drive more sustainable outcomes;
- value public participation so that we can hear from those most impacted by decisions etc.;
- will investigate, and remain keen to hear at any time about, those things in which local people wish to be involved (and where they want to be consulted or to co-design or co-produce something with the Council) and will thereafter facilitate that involvement where possible;
- where local people do wish to be involved, will do our utmost to ensure they are well informed;
- will include a section in Key Decision reports where we explain involvement from local people and other relevant stakeholders in advance of the decision and state clearly what influence this has had on the decision being taken; and
- will continue to review the way that we have engaged with local people and consider how we might improve.

### 3.2 When involving local people we will:

- give people a chance to be involved at the earliest possible opportunity and allow enough time to engage with them and for them to make a genuine contribution;
- use a variety of approaches so we're hearing from a range of voices which reflect the whole community, and we understand that not everyone wants to engage with us in the same way;
- be honest about what can or can't be changed and any other limitations;
- ensure that all Council departments keep Ward Councillors informed of issues and developments that have a particular impact on their Wards and alert them well in advance to decisions that have a significant effect on their constituents; and
- review engagement activity, and share learning across the Council.

### 3.3 We will do all we possibly can not to ask people for information they have already given us, and we will not overstate what we can offer.

## 4. **Major plans, policies and projects**

### 4.1 When we are developing significant plans, policies and projects we will:

- seek views from local people at an early stage, before a Council policy has been formulated, so as to gather ideas and opinions;
- take account of this input in formulating a draft Council proposal;
- put the draft Council proposal out to consultation, using appropriate means of communication and give people enough time to comment – usually at least six weeks;
- publish a full list of consultations underway in a single place on the Council website;
- make a clear statement on the Council website of our approach to consultation on new plans, policies and projects.

## 5. **Getting involved in Council meetings**

### 5.1 To achieve our aim, we will:

- give at least 5 clear working days' notice of Council, committee and Leadership Team meetings and help people to find agenda papers, reports, minutes and any background papers used in preparing reports;
- welcome interested local people to our meetings and provide reasonable opportunities for them to speak and to film or record the public part of any meeting;

- routinely explore and provide opportunities for interested local people to get involved in the Council's Scrutiny activities, ensuring Scrutiny activity focuses above all on the things that matter most to local people;
- give at the very least 28 calendar days notice, on the published [Forward Plan of Decisions](#), of all decisions we intend to take which involve income or expenditure of £100,000 or more, or which have a significant impact on two or more electoral wards; and
- welcome and respond efficiently to petitions in line with our [Petitions Guidance](#).

## **6. Additionally local people**

- may complain to the Council itself under its Complaints Scheme; to the Ombudsman after exhausting the provisions of the Council's Complaints Scheme; to the Council's Monitoring Officer about a breach of the [Councillor Code of Conduct](#); and to the [Information Commissioner](#) where applicable;
- may [inspect the Council's accounts](#) and make their views known to the external auditor; and
- may, where they use a specific Council service (for example as a parent of a school pupil or as a Council tenant), have additional legal rights which are not covered here.

## **7. Openness and transparency**

- 7.1 We will make it easy for people to find out whom to contact about any particular issue and will publish on the Council website Councillor and senior officer email addresses. However where people want to make a complaint or have a routine enquiry they should pursue this via the complaints form on the ['Complaints, Comments and Compliments' page on the Council website](#) or by phone on *[new phone number to be inserted when finalised, in early 2020]* so as to ensure a timely response to the issue in question and to make sure the Council captures and learns from all complaints.
- 7.2 We will make it easy to find information, as well as responding in a timely way to specific requests for information.

## **8. A two-way relationship**

- 8.1 If it's to function effectively the relationship between the Council and local people has to be a two-way, reciprocal, one. Whilst the Council will continue to explore ways to better communicate with, to empower, and to maintain the trust of, local people, if the Council is to represent, and speak or act with authority on behalf of, local people then there is an onus on

local people to feed back to, and communicate openly and constructively with councillors and council staff.

**8.2 So we encourage local people:**

- wherever they can to access Council services and other information via our website in the first instance;
- to vote in elections and, more generally, to participate in public life;
- to take part in consultations, giving their views and feedback local services and holding the Council to account – telling the Council if and when it ‘gets it wrong’; and
- to do what they can, individually or with others, to make the Borough a better place to live.

**9. Accessibility**

9.1 We want to ensure that there are no barriers preventing local people from accessing Council services, facilities and meetings.

9.2 We are keen that local people feel welcome at our meetings so will ensure these are held in accessible rooms, with facilities available for those requiring additional assistance. Requests for information in alternative formats will be accommodated wherever possible.

**10. Accountability for our Charter commitments**

10.1 It is Important that the Charter is not purely aspirational but, rather, is the catalyst for and reflection of real culture change. All departments of the Council, and all staff, will need to deliver consistently to the standards set out in this document. However there may be occasions where local people feel we have fallen short. If and when this happens we want to hear about it - via the [‘Complaints, Comments and Compliments’ page on the Council website](#) - so that we can apologise when we’ve not lived up to our commitments and, as far as possible, put things right.

10.2 The overarching principles in this Charter will feed into, and be supplemented by, more specific or service-based commitments contained other documents such as the Community Engagement Strategy, the Statement of Community Involvement in Planning and the Resident Charter for Housing Tenants.

## Grasping Opportunities to Increase Public Participation

The Council will continue to engage with local people, and facilitate participation, on a number of levels, looking for opportunities where possible to push engagement and participation towards the right hand of the scale below.

