

## **East Herts Council Report**

### **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Date of Meeting:** 7<sup>th</sup> November 2023

**Report by:** Councillor Chris Wilson, Executive Member for Resident Engagement

**Report title:** Draft 'A Listening Council: East Herts Council's principles for information giving, engagement and consultation' document

**Ward(s) affected:** All

### **Summary**

- This report provides members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the opportunity to consider and provide comments on the draft proposed set of principles governing how the council will inform, engage and consult residents, businesses and stakeholders. The principles have been set out in a simple, draft document titled 'A Listening Council'. This committee report invites input at the earliest stage, that is, prior to the Executive considering whether to endorse the document for public consultation.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Overview and Scrutiny Committee members:**

- (A) To consider the draft 'A Listening Council' set of principles for informing, engaging and consulting residents, businesses and stakeholders and provide comments to the Executive Member for Resident Engagement.**

## **1.0 Background**

1.1 The Executive Member for Resident Engagement has reflected on the council's approach to involving residents, businesses and stakeholders in the council's decisions which affect them. While the Executive Member recognises there have been examples of excellent practice across the council in recent years, he now wishes to propose that the council enshrines open and transparent information giving, engagement and consultation at the heart of its way of working. To this end, a document has been drafted that lays out in as simple and straightforward a way as possible, the principles the council will follow when seeking to inform, engage and consult residents, businesses and stakeholders.

## **2.0 Reason(s)**

2.1 East Herts Council provides a significant number of services for local people and businesses alike. In addition, within a three tier government environment – county, district and parish – the district provides many of the services that have a considerable impact on individuals and communities, for example, though certainly not limited to:

- a) planning policy and decisions on developments both large and small
- b) waste collection
- c) custodianship of parks and open spaces
- d) efforts to tackle the climate emergency
- e) housing, especially if a household is facing homelessness
- f) regulation of pubs, nightclubs, taxis, premises selling food, animal welfare establishments and the like
- g) provision of leisure facilities.

2.2 In many ways, the council itself can be considered a 'partner' to East Herts residents' regarding their wellbeing and day-to-

day enjoyment of their surroundings. Thus, it is incumbent on the council to make every effort to work with and listen to residents, as well as businesses and stakeholders, not least of which because this helps the council make better decisions. Put simply, when the council talks to the people who live and work in the district, it can learn about problems, generate ideas for dealing with shared and often thorny issues and, hopefully, engender mutual understanding and 'buy in'.

- 2.3 With the pressures facing the council, residents, businesses and stakeholders alike, it can be a struggle to focus on meaningful engagement. That said, there are undoubtedly pockets of good practice within the council such as:
- a) involvement of local groups in identifying potential priorities for use of UK Shared Prosperity Fund resources
  - b) the well-established East Herts Environmental and Climate Forum and
  - c) the council's work with local people through the Hertford Playground Alliance to codesign a new children's play facilities at Hartham Common, a joint approach that saw the council shortlisted for the Municipal Journal's 'Delivering Better Outcomes' Award in 2022.
- 2.4 At the same time, however, the council does not have a clear, published set of principles governing how it will inform, engage and consult. The draft proposed 'A Listening Council' document at Appendix A aims to address this gap.
- 2.5 'A Listening Council' sets out what the council believes are the building blocks for effective information giving, engagement and consultation facilitated by the council, these being:
- transparency
  - straightforward, jargon-free messaging

- involvement methods tailored to the locality, community and topic
- a genuine desire to listen
- multi-channel involvement; not simply relying on online methods
- reaching out to those whose voices can sometimes go unheard
- allowing people to access council information to the depth they prefer
- a central, active role for all elected members
- listening to feedback.

2.6 The draft document makes clear that the building blocks are not just theory; it is proposed that the council will use them to guide information giving, engagement and consultation exercises.

2.7 Elsewhere on this Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting agenda is a proposal to establish:

- a) Community Forums which would bring together residents, members, housing developers and other stakeholders to raise and work together on the myriad issues that can naturally arise as new communities establish themselves on new, strategic housing developments and
- b) Development Management Forums which would enable local people and interested parties to input to proposed developments at an early, pre-planning application stage.

2.8 These two proposals are examples of how the council can put the theory laid out in 'A Listening Council' into practice for the direct benefit of local people.

2.9 The version of the 'A Listening Council' document before the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is the first draft. Members are invited to scrutinise its purpose and content and provide

feedback for the Executive Member for Resident Engagement to consider prior to presenting it to the Executive for their endorsement to consult the public about it. It is anticipated that should Executive endorse the document for consultation, Overview and Scrutiny Committee members will, should they wish, have an opportunity to scrutinise the post-consultation version.

### **3.0 Options**

- 3.1 Continue to carry out information giving, engagement and consultation on a case-by-case basis without a published set of principles – NOT RECOMMENDED as this can lead to problems such as inconsistency, perceived tokenism and a missed opportunity to learn from involvement exercises on an ongoing basis.
- 3.2 Endorse the document for presentation by the Executive Member for Resident Engagement to the Executive, including making suggested amendments for the consideration of the Executive Member should Overview and Scrutiny Committee members so choose – RECOMMENDED.

### **4.0 Risks**

- 4.1 There is a possible reputational risk that should the council ultimately adopt 'A Listening Council' it may be unable, due to capacity and/or financial resources, to conduct all its involvement exercises in line with the principles and thus invite criticism. This risk can be minimised by developing best practice guidance for officers and members and continually learning from different exercises on how best to involve people in a meaningful way within the resources available to the council.

## **5.0 Implications/Consultations**

### 5.1 Community Safety

None arising directly from this report.

### 5.2 Data Protection

None arising directly from this report.

### 5.3 Equalities

The 'A Listening Council' document explicitly includes 'Reaching out to those whose voices can sometimes go unheard' among its underlying principles. It is to be expected that some groups with protected characteristics may go unheard by the council. Prior to finalisation of the document and its presentation to members for adoption, a full equalities impact assessment will be conducted to ensure any issues are recognised and addressed.

### 5.4 Environmental Sustainability

None arising directly from this report.

### 5.5 Financial

None arising directly from this report as, ultimately, any exercises to inform, engage or consult will be carried out within existing budgets.

### 5.6 Health and Safety

None arising directly from this report.

### 5.7 Human Resources

None arising directly from this report.

### 5.8 Human Rights

None arising directly from this report.

### 5.9 Legal

Some of the council's work requires, by statute and/or government guidance, consultation to be conducted via prescribed means and/or over a set period of time. This applies, for example, to consultation on revisions to the District Plan and changes to the council's various licensing policies. Ultimate adoption of the 'A Listening Council' principles would not in any way over-ride or fetter the council's adherence to externally determined consultation requirements.

5.10 Specific Wards  
No.

## **6.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material**

6.1 Background Information: None.

6.2 Appendices

- a) **Appendix A** – draft proposed 'A Listening Consultation: East Herts Council's principles for information giving, engagement and consultation'.

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