

East Herts Council Report

Executive

Date of meeting: 28th 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 presents the proposed 'A Listening Council' 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 and have been considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, with the Executive Member for Resident Engagement making changes accordingly. The Executive is now invited to consider the draft document and endorse it for public consultation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR the Executive:

- a) to endorse the draft 'A Listening Council' set of principles for informing, engaging and consulting residents, businesses and stakeholders for public consultation.**

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. It is anticipated that the 'Listening Council' principles will be reflected in the upcoming review of the council's corporate plan.

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.
- 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 It is recognised that residents, businesses and other stakeholders across the district will have a variety of different views and opinions and so, while it is vital to listen to and hear these views, it is an unavoidable conclusion that listening to someone will not always lead to agreement. Given the remit of the council, it is inevitable that the council will sometimes need to balance competing views when reaching a decision.

2.7 Seeking to involve and listen to as wide a range of insights and opinions as possible is integral to the council's approach to promoting equality and celebrating diversity. Furthermore, the council's approach to safeguarding is predicated on maximising the ways in which everyone can raise

concerns. The 'A Listening Council' document, by helping establish a greater range of consultative mechanisms, should assist in this.

- 2.8 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' even if sometimes a decision reached by the council doesn't find universal favour.
- 2.9 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.

Consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 7th November

- 2.10 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the draft 'A Listening Council' document in some detail at its meeting of 7th November. Several points and possible amendments or additions were raised for the Executive Member for Resident Engagement's consideration. Some points were addressed by the Executive Member at the meeting while he also committed to reflect on the committee's suggestions before presenting the document to the Executive on 28th November for the Executive to decide on endorsing it for public consultation. The outcome for the Executive Member's consideration is given in Appendix B. In summary, in response to the committee's discussion, the Executive Member has:
- amended the draft document to explicitly refer to (a) members' ability to raise residents' and others' concerns through the established Overview and Scrutiny process and (b) the important role for members in facilitating dialogue and joint working between all three tiers of local government in East Herts
 - listened to members' concerns that the document will only have an impact if it is put into practice. The Executive Member concurs and will work with senior officers to ensure the necessary training, development and guidance is put in place to ensure the principles, if ultimately approved by Council, are implemented
 - carefully considered whether the emphasis of the document should be on aspiring and committing to hearing residents, businesses and partners rather than listening to them. The Executive Member's conclusion is that *hearing* could be construed somewhat narrowly as simply one of the five

senses, while the use of the term *listening* more accurately describes the *proactive* effort and skill to listen to and understand what people are saying. Thus, while there are already references in the document to wishing to hear people, particularly those whose voices often go unheard, the emphasis remains on *listening*

- understood that members of the committee are concerned that constraints on the council's budgets may act against implementation. The Executive Member has been assured by officers that as putting the principles into practice will rely of 'doing thing differently' rather than 'doing additional things' there will not be an appreciable extra call of the council's budgets.

Next steps

- 2.11 Should the Executive agree the recommendation in this report, the 'A Listening Council' document will be put out to public consultation. Once this consultation has been concluded, the Executive Member for Resident Engagement will work with Head of Housing and Health to consider the comments made and amend the document accordingly. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be able to, should they wish, consider the post-consultation draft before it returns to the Executive.

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, which incorporates amendments following suggestions by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, for public consultation – RECOMMENDED.

4.0 Risks

- 4.1 There is a possible reputational risk that should 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

Any training or development to support implementation of the 'A Listening Council' principles can be accommodated within the council's existing training budgets. There are no other financial implications arising directly from this report as, ultimately, any exercises to inform, engage or consult will be carried out within existing budgets or with additional funding, whether from internal or external sources, approved by members on a case-by-case basis.

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'.

b) Appendix B – consideration of comments from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

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