

East Herts Council Report

Executive

Date of meeting: Tuesday 9th July 2024

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

Report title: A Listening Council

Ward(s) affected:

All wards

Summary

In response to the recent consultation on the 'A Listening Council' document, this report provides an overview of the feedback received and consequent amendments made. An amended version of the document is presented for approval.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EXECUTIVE:

- a) that the 'A Listening Council' document as amended following public consultation, presented in Appendix A, be approved.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The council's Corporate Plan, adopted by Council at its meeting on 28th February 2024, makes explicit that one of the council's core drivers is listening and being open and transparent. The 'A Listening Council' document lays out the principles and methods by which the council will adopt a listening approach.
- 1.2 The first draft of the 'A Listening Council' document was considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 7th

November 2023. The Executive Member for Resident Engagement drew on the committee's proposed amendments before putting a revised version of the document to the Executive at its meeting on 28th November 2023. At this meeting, the Executive endorsed the document for consultation. This report discusses the outcome of the consultation and present a final version of the 'A Listening Council' document for consideration by the Executive.

- 1.3 Since endorsement of the document for consultation, on 28th February 2024, Council has approved the East Herts Corporate Plan which included as one of its overarching aims that the council should adopt a 'Listening, open and transparent' stance. The benefits of this approach are underlined by the Local Government Association's (LGA) review of ['Innovation in community engagement'](#) which includes numerous case studies demonstrating how effective engagement can help councils save money, reduce complaints and increase public understanding of how councils work and the pressures they face.
- 1.4 For example, the LGA's work refers to Stroud District Council's Community Engagement Board which was established to bring together officers, councillors and volunteer community representatives to discuss how to reduce district carbon emissions. This is very similar to East Herts Council's Environmental and Climate Forum which has taken on a renewed focus since Council declared a Climate Emergency on 26th July 2023. Of note, the Forum has benefitted from local experts leading teach-in sessions, most recently covering air source heat pumps, without any cost to the council.

- 1.5 The LGA study also mentions Staffordshire County Council's approach to better engagement which involved recruiting 'trusted voices' within local communities who could make connections in their local areas to promote informed dialogue between the council and the public.
- 1.6 These examples point to how important it is to strengthen the council's approach to information giving, engagement and consultation as laid out in the 'A Listening Council' document.

2.0 Reason(s)

- 2.1 Given the remit to seek the views of East Herts residents on the 'A Listening Council' document as discussed above, the document itself was made available for public consultation, digitally and in paper form, throughout the month of April 2024.
- 2.2 As envisioned by the document itself, although comments were invited via the online form, officers also discussed the document in person with several groups with which the council works very closely, including:
 - Dementia Friendly Group
 - The Joint Action Group. Partners include Housing Associations, East Herts Citizen's Advice, Community Alliance, MIND and others
 - East Herts Health & Wellbeing Group.
- 2.3 Information about the consultation was shared with many of the council's partners too, including:
 - HCC Services for Young People
 - Healthy Hub East Herts partner distribution list
 - Social Prescribing contacts

- East Hertfordshire Libraries.

2.4 Different publicity channels were also used:

- East Herts Council social media campaign
- physical displays in libraries
- council members via the Member Information Bulletin
- staff meetings.

2.5 It impossible to calculate how many individuals heard of the consultation through all the different routes listed above, however, we know that 86 individuals viewed the online material in addition to those who discussed the document in face-to-face meetings, with 23 fully completed survey questionnaires received. While all views through the various channels have been heard, this report focuses on the responses from the 23 completed questionnaires.

2.6 As the document essentially provides a description of *how* the council will enable consultation rather than the detail of *what* it will consult on, it is perhaps unsurprising that the number of participants in the consultation wasn't higher. Experience shows, however, that there is a tendency for people to engage with council in greater numbers on specific issues about which they feel particularly strongly or that they believe affect them and their families to a significant degree. Of note, the council's recently introduced Community Forums on strategic sites have attracted 60 to 90+ people each time. Also, within the last year, the council received 189 responses to the Air Quality Action Plan consultation, while over 900 taking part in the consultation on the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan.

2.7 The responses we have received to the 'A Listening Council' consultation are clearly very well-considered and have provided valuable feedback on how to make the document as clear and easy to understand as possible. In addition, the council is at the start of a new approach to consultation and so will continually reflect on and learn from its engagement activities, thus, there will be more opportunities for people to share their views.

2.8 Appendix B lists the comments made in response to the following three questions:

- How clearly do you think we have described these approaches?
- How well do you think we have explained these building blocks that we need to build our approach upon?
- Is there anything you feel is missing from or you would like us to add to the Listening Council document?

2.9 The analysis, also given in Appendix B, has focused on the areas for improvement to the document suggested by respondents. A series of amendments have been made to the 'A Listening Council' document as a direct result of the consultation, a fact that in itself demonstrates the council's openness to the public's feedback. It should be noted that some comments related to specific services rather than the document itself. While these comments have not been included in the analysis, they have been passed to officers in the relevant services to consider.

2.10 In summary, the most substantive amendments proposed are:

- additional wording to make more explicit the recognition that honest communication is at the heart of the 'A Listening

Council' approach, even in instances where the council cannot act on residents' suggestions

- the addition of a more explicit commitment to include feedback and consultation responses in published reports when making decisions
- a rewording of the commitment to enable people to 'access information at the depth they prefer' to 'Allowing people to be able to get information from the council at the level of detail they prefer'
- a simplifying of references to 'elected members', notably, using the term 'councillors' instead which is perhaps more readily understood by the public.

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 Not make any amendments following the consultation feedback – NOT RECOMMENDED as this would see the council missing out on the valuable observations and suggestions made by the public and, indeed, would undermine the desire to listen to feedback articulated within the document itself.

3.2 Endorse the document, which incorporates amendments following public consultation – RECOMMENDED.

4.0 Risks

4.1 There is a possible reputational risk that in adopting the 'A Listening Council' document, the council 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

Community Safety

None arising directly from this report.

Data Protection

None arising directly from this report.

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.

Environmental Sustainability

None arising directly from this report.

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.

Health and Safety

None arising directly from this report.

Human Resources

None arising directly from this report.

Human Rights

None arising directly from this report.

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.

Specific Wards

No

6.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

6.1 Background Information: None.

6.2 Appendices:

Appendix A – 'A Listening Consultation: East Herts Council's principles for information giving, engagement and consultation' final version with amendments incorporated following public consultation.

Appendix B - 'A Listening Council' – Feedback from consultation.

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