

Committee: Public Engagement Working Group

Date: 13 September 2018

Title: Public Engagement

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Item for decision

Summary

1. This report presents recommendations to improve the council's engagement methods, based on discussions at a series of meetings of the Public Engagement Working Group.

Recommendations

2. The Public Engagement Working Group recommends to Council the actions as set out in this report.

Financial Implications

3. Most actions can be either delivered within existing budgets or at no additional cost. The exception to this is the proposal set out in paragraphs 28 to 37 for a district wide conversation which will require an estimated budget of £20,000. This additional budget would need to be approved as part of the growth bid process later this year. It may be possible to acquire some funding from the Local Strategic Partnership.
4. In addition to this currently unbudgeted cost, there could be the risk of further, possibly significant, costs arising from the outcome of the engagement activity. The council could be at risk of failing to act on the survey responses/outcomes as budgetary restraints may prevent it from implementing recommendations. It will therefore be important to ensure expectations are managed throughout the engagement.

Background Papers

5. None

Impact

- 6.

Communication/Consultation	The report covers current and proposed methods
Community Safety	None
Equalities	Opportunities for all residents to participate is an important consideration when

	planning any engagement event and special consideration as to how to ensure representative participation is achieved is given to such aspects as access, publicity, etc.
Health and Safety	None
Human Rights/Legal Implications	None
Sustainability	None
Ward-specific impacts	None
Workforce/Workplace	Many of the council's staff are also residents and therefore the opportunity to consult and engage them will be built into any future plans.

Situation

7. Following the successful establishment of the Youth Council, the Public Engagement Working Group (PEWG) has been looking at wider issues of engagement in terms of the work the council does with specific sections of our community and with the public as a whole.
8. The PEWG gained an understanding of current thinking and practices from a presentation and discussion about the Local Government Association's New Conversations guide to engagement. One of the guide's authors attended a working group meeting to give an overview.
9. The PEWG has spent time discussing current engagement methods the council uses and has noted that there is a wide range of ways in which the council already effectively engages with its stakeholders. The working group has acknowledged that engagement is a broad term and occurs every time a stakeholder interacts with the council, from one-way communication, through consultation, to ongoing dialogue. A list presented to a meeting of the PEWG is appended to this report for information. The PEWG has also discussed changing trends in the media landscape and the increasing importance of social media as a means by which the public engages directly with the council.
10. Following this, members of the PEWG have identified where they see the council effectively engaging and conversely, areas where they believe improvement can be made.
11. This report sets out those areas where it believes the council should focus its efforts to better engage with stakeholders and recommendations for specific actions to achieve these improvements.

12. Except where otherwise noted, the actions below can be implemented in the current 2018/19 year.

Member Training

13. Working group members have identified that councillors play a crucial role in effective engagement with the community. They are best-placed to understand the needs and views of the people they represent and provide valuable insight to improve policies and service delivery.
14. However, it was felt that in order to maximise the effectiveness of councillors, the council's approach to member development, including the induction process for new members, should be reviewed.
15. Officers are already working on the design of the induction programme following next year's elections. Examples of best practice have been sought and a meeting has been held with representatives of the LGA to identify the resources they offer in this regard. Members will shortly be invited to form a 'working group' to guide and advise on the work of officers and it is hoped all members will contribute their views to a short survey planned to help inform future training for members.

Telling People What the Council is Responsible For

16. Whilst acknowledging that the council has many forms of public engagement and communication in place, members of the working group have expressed views that the council does not go far enough in telling the public what it is responsible for. In order to improve this, there are a number of actions proposed:
17. **Council Tax leaflet** – The council produces a Council Tax leaflet each year. This is delivered to every household along with their Council Tax bill and contains information on what Council Tax is, who has to pay it, and how Council Tax is split between the relevant authorities. It also has information on the various discounts and exemptions available, as well as details on penalty notices, fraud prevention and debt management.
18. This leaflet presents a good opportunity to provide additional information about the services provided by Uttlesford District Council specifically, and how these are funded. This would be best realised in part by incorporating an infographic providing the headline figures in an eye-catching and easy-to-read format.
19. **Features on staff** – In order to better engage and educate the public in the work of the council, officers will produce regular features which highlight the work of key staff carrying out various different functions on behalf of the council. These would primarily be 'public-facing' roles such as, for example, Environmental Health officers who carry out restaurant inspections or Building Control officers. Articles would be featured on the council website and promoted through communications channels including the *Keep me posted* e-newsletters and on the council's Facebook page. As well as providing

information on many of the services the council provides to benefit the community it would also help to personalise the council.

20. **Participation in Meetings** – While there is time for public speaking before every Council, Cabinet and committee meeting, it is important to ensure that the public is aware of this opportunity. Therefore as part of the work to educate the public in the role of the council, regular publicity will be given to the different types of meeting the council holds, including what each committee is responsible for. A summary of upcoming meetings will be circulated, including via social media and the council's e-newsletter service, *Keep me posted* to ensure residents are aware of the opportunities that are available to them.

Increasing Opportunity for the Public to Give Feedback

21. The council already gives many opportunities to the public and other stakeholders to provide feedback on a range of council proposals and services, from commenting on planning applications and speaking at meetings to district-wide consultation opportunities such as those on the budget and Local Council Tax Support scheme.
22. **Instant surveying** - Officers will investigate the possibility of further expanding feedback opportunities using the council's e-newsletter service, *Keep me posted*, as a conduit for instant surveying.
23. One method is to integrate a simple 'yes/no' poll-type questions within the suite of newsletters – for example, asking subscribers whether they consider they are kept well informed by the council, or their view on a particular service or aspect of service. The advantage of this approach is that it would be achievable without upgrading the system and so a cost effective way to improve the two-way conversation across this well-used platform.
24. It is also possible within our existing systems to run a more complex survey by directing consultees from an e-newsletter to a consultation hosted on the council's website. Some investigation will be needed should members wish more complex questions to be embedded within the *Keep me posted* platform. This would require discussion with our supplier.
25. In either scenario, it is important that when asking for feedback we endeavour to 'close the circle' – i.e. we must share with consultees the outcomes and actions arising from their feedback. This would be achieved by posting results of the survey and actions stemming from it via the newsletters.
26. **Members' surgeries** – Some councillors hold regular surgeries for residents in their wards. Currently these are managed and publicised by individual councillors. It would be beneficial to establish a page on the council website to host details of all councillor surgeries. It would be up to individual members to notify officers of their surgeries and reminders would be sent out via the Members' Bulletin. While we would not promote individual surgeries, we would regularly publicise this central location for residents to find out if and when their ward councillors are available.
27. **Complaints** – Complaints can be a valuable source of engagement and of course an opportunity to improve processes and customer service. The council already reports complaint data and the annual report of the Local

Government Ombudsman via to the Governance, Audit and Performance Committee. Officers propose to expand this reporting by including quarterly complaints data in the Members' Bulletin as well as providing a link through the bulletin to the annual report to GAP.

Conversations Across the District

28. The PEWG believes the public has a vital role to play in shaping the future of the district and while recognising the many ways in which interested people can already be involved, has indicated it would like to see more opportunity for conversation across the district.
29. **This is Uttlesford** - To this end, it is proposed that the council runs an extensive engagement campaign to talk to people about how they feel about living in Uttlesford – what they like, what they would like to change and what can be done to make it an even better place to live.
30. With a working name of *This is Uttlesford*, this district-wide conversation would combine qualitative and quantitative consultation and engagement to build a picture of life in the district and the views and aspirations of a cross-section of the community.
31. Methods could include a postal survey, face-to-face interviews and an online forum. The consultation would be taken out into the district to give people the opportunity to engage with the council in the place where they live. A statistically significant response rate will be obtained to give confidence in the results.
32. This would not be a council-specific survey; rather it would focus on general themes of living in Uttlesford in a similar way to the Tracker Survey previously conducted county-wide by Essex County Council. It would seek views, for example, on how safe people feel where they live, what they value most from public services, what they would like to see improved in their local area and how satisfied they are with their life in the district.
33. There is also an educational element to this piece of work, with the aim of increasing public understanding of who does what in the community and also explaining possible changes to council funding in coming years and the potential impact on resources available to the district council and other public sector bodies.
34. Results could not only be used to help the council shape its priorities in the coming years but also provide valuable data for a refresh of the Local Strategic Partnership's Community Strategy.
35. Such a wide-ranging piece of work can only be delivered with external support and expertise. Therefore it is proposed that the project is offered to market research and engagement specialist companies to ensure the campaign is delivered in the most appropriate way. Council officers would work with the selected company on questions, branding and approach.

36. It is estimated that a budget of £20,000 would be sufficient to deliver an effective engagement campaign. This would be a one-off growth item in the 2019/20 budget following further scoping and planning work. There may be an opportunity to seek some funding from the Local Strategic Partnership and from the individual partners that make up the LSP with regard to using the results for the refresh of the Community Strategy.
37. Subject to member acceptance of this proposal, procurement would be carried out in the latter part of 2018/19 with the campaign taking place in the 2019/20 council year, following the elections.

Digital Improvements

38. During discussions at meetings, members of the PEWG identified that there was scope for improvement to the council's website and also that while customers can expect an excellent level of service, at peak times there can be delays in phone calls being answered in the Customer Service Centre.
39. There is a two-stage programme already in place which will help address these issues, which is outlined below for members' information.
40. **Website** - Data shows a year-on-year increase in the number of visits to the council's website, from 446,572 in 2012/13 to 776,575 in 2017/18. The number of people accessing the website via a mobile device has almost doubled between 2014/15 and 2017/18 and now accounts for more than a third of all visits.
41. However, the current website is six years old and there are limitations both in terms of its look and feel and how easy it is to use, particularly on mobile devices. In addition, the council is in a minority now with not offering an online account facility to allow residents to carry out popular tasks such as checking council tax balances, accessing housing rents information and notifying changes to circumstances which may affect benefits payments.
42. Socitm, the body for local government IT, runs an annual programme called Better Connected, which reviews every council website in the UK and awards a rating from one to four stars. This assessment comprises various tests on the usability of the website.
43. Uttlesford has always scored well on the tasks element of Better Connected, where the reviewer tries to complete common tasks such as booking a bulky waste collection, finding out information about a councillor or applying for a council tax single person discount. But in recent years we have been pulled down on the mobile test because the age of the site means it does not work particularly well on modern mobile devices. For example, last year we met all the criteria to be awarded the maximum four star rating (an exceptional achievement for a small district authority with very limited web resources) but our overall rating was two stars because of the mobile issues.
44. Following approval of a growth bid in February 2018, officers have carried out a procurement exercise and have selected a supplier for a new website. This site is due to go live in the Autumn and will provide multiple benefits:

- Significantly improved functionality when viewed on mobile and tablet devices
- Cleaner design based around Government Digital Service (GDS) principals as used on GOV.UK
- Much improved 'signposting' to key tasks such as making payments, searching planning applications, applying for services
- Improved forms package so that forms are easier to use and more secure
- Better navigation so that 'customer journeys' are shorter – this means that it is easier for users to find what they want

45. **Citizens Access** - The second stage of this programme is the installation of Northgate Citizens Access. This system has a number of modules that will allow customers to set up personal accounts and carry out online transactions for Council Tax, Housing Benefits and Housing Rents, which they cannot do at the moment. As with the website project, a growth bid for the cost of this system was approved in February 2018.

46. The modules will integrate with the council's back office systems, reducing the need for manual intervention and allowing existing staff resources to be freed up to focus on other tasks.

47. Citizens Access will allow customers to carry out key transactions including applications for Council Tax discounts, accessing information such as balance and instalment details, changing details such as addresses, Direct Debit sign up, benefits status checks, housing repairs bookings and e-billing sign up.

48. It will allow the council to move away from paper Council Tax billing to e-billing and will make these services available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, instead of during council opening hours.

49. The aim is to reduce calls, visits and email enquiries to the Customer Service Centre for these services by 10 per cent within one year of the modules going live, rising to 15 per cent within two years. This will have a positive impact on waiting times and allow the council's Customer Service Advisors to focus on those customers who need to contact the council by traditional methods.

50. The Citizens Access project is in the early stages of commencement and will take 18 months to fully install. A soft launch of the service will take place during 2019/20 with all households receiving log-in details and guidance alongside their 2020/21 annual Council Tax bill.

Risk Analysis

51.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
The council's engagement	2 – the council has well-	3 – a lack of engagement	The actions set out in this report

methods are not effective, leading to reputational damage and a loss of confidence	established methods but there are areas for improvement as identified in this report	with the community the council serves could have a detrimental impact on the district	are designed to have a real and lasting positive impact, giving opportunity for those who wish to take it
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1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.

Appendix A – Current Engagement Methods

WHAT	PURPOSE	FREQUENCY	TARGET AUDIENCE
Local Councils' Liaison Forum	Opportunity for parish councils to talk directly to UDC about matters concerning them	2-3 times a year	Parish councils as grassroots representatives of their community
The Parish Planning Forum	Opportunity for parish councils to talk directly to UDC about planning matters	2-3 times a year	Parish councils as grassroots representatives of their community
Council, Cabinet and Committee meetings	Official forum for members of the public to ask questions or voice opinions	According to committee table	Residents, businesses, partner agencies and all other interested parties
Member surgeries	Opportunity for residents to talk to their ward members on issues concerning them or their community	Varying, arranged by individual members	Residents within each members' ward
Customer services	To provide a platform for members of the public to speak to officers on a face-to-face/conversational/e mail or other basis	Daily	Residents, businesses, partner agencies and all other interested parties
Multi-agency information trailer/roadshow	Opportunity for housing tenants and leaseholders to get face-to-face advice and support from the council and a range of partner agencies	Once a month (Mar-Sept) at a different venue each time, plus attendance at other community events	Council housing tenants and leaseholders
Tenant Forum	Opportunity for tenants and leaseholders to have a voice on the housing services supplied by the council	Six times a year	Members of the Tenant Forum as elected representatives of council tenants and leaseholders
Tenant Regulatory Panel	Opportunity for tenants and leaseholders to scrutinise housing services and make recommendations for improvements	Bi-monthly	Members of the Tenant Regulatory Panel on behalf of council tenants and leaseholders

Multi-Agency Centre (MAC)	To provide accessible, face-to-face, free advice and support. Delivered by a wide range of public services	Once a fortnight	Residents who need additional support and advice on issues such as dealing with debt, budgeting, benefits, housing and eviction, domestic abuse, and support with mental illness
Local Community Meetings	Opportunity for the public to speak to the police and community safety partners about issues affecting them or their community	Quarterly (one meeting held in the north of the district, and one held in the south)	Members of the public
Drinks with Community Links	New initiative – opportunity for residents to speak informally to members of the Community Safety Partnership about community safety issues	'Pop-up' / ad-hoc at venues across the district	Members of the public
'Safety Natters'	To provide sheltered housing residents with an opportunity to speak informally to council-funded Police Community Support Officer, and Community Safety Officer about community safety issues	Monthly at various sheltered housing sites	Sheltered housing residents
Community Safety events (e.g. Crucial Crew, Roadster)	To deliver safety messages to school pupils on topical issues, 'hidden harms' and road safety for young drivers. Events are interactive and informative	Annual	Year 6 pupils (Crucial Crew); 16-17 years olds (Roadster)
Citizens Panel	To gauge public satisfaction with council services	Bi-annual	Independently selected group of residents as a cross-section representation of the local

			population
Website focus group	To provide the Citizens Panel with an opportunity to comment on aspects of the council website	Annual	Citizens Panel
1Life customer forum	Opportunity for users of the leisure centres to have their say on the services provided and the way they are provided / run by 1Life with input from the council	Quarterly	Customers of the three leisure centres in the district (Lord Butler, Gt Dunmow, Mountfitchet Romeera)
Consultations & surveys	Opportunities for the public to voice their opinions on a range of issues, decisions and initiatives e.g. the Local Plan / budget and priorities / Housing Star Survey etc.	Varying	Residents, businesses, tenants/leaseholders, staff and external stakeholders including neighbouring councils and statutory bodies
Public exhibitions	Opportunity for people to find out more and speak to the council about a particular topic or project e.g. Local Plan	Varying	Residents, businesses and external stakeholders including neighbouring councils and statutory bodies
Training sessions & workshops	To provide opportunity for people to learn more about, discuss, and exchange ideas on particular themes and projects e.g. Dementia Friends sessions	Varying	Residents, businesses, staff and external stakeholders including neighbouring councils and statutory and voluntary agencies
Campaigns	Opportunity for the council to promote and engage with the community on a particular initiative or service e.g. Responsible Dog Awareness, Love Essex anti-litter	Varying	Residents, businesses, staff and external stakeholders including neighbouring councils and statutory and voluntary agencies

Business breakfast	To foster relations with the business community, build networks, and discuss business-related issues	Annual	Members of the business community
Private Sector Landlord Forum	An information and support event to foster relations with the private sector landlord community, build networks, and discuss and support landlords on related issues	Annual	Landlords within the private sector, including those with only one or two properties in their portfolio
Youth Council	Opportunity for young people to have a voice on council policies and decisions, and topical local issues	6-8 times a year	Young people aged 13-19 elected from each secondary school in the district and representing the views of other young people
Wellbeing events (the 'Winter Warmers')	To provide informative, interactive sessions full of advice on staying safe and well during the winter months	Annual, held at different venues	People over 60
Local Strategic Partnership conference	Opportunity for council and partner agencies to discuss topical issues affecting local communities	Annual	Partner agencies
TuckIN	Local businesses encouraged to be part of the scheme in order that they can offer healthy eating options for consumers	Ongoing project	Food businesses, members of the public
Social Media	To communicate informally, instantly and in a two-way manner with the public, and to engage with an audience that the council may not be able to reach through traditional communications	Used daily (M-F, 9am-5pm, 7 days a week in times of particular need eg during bad weather)	Facebook and Twitter users including residents, businesses and partner organisations
<i>Keep me posted e-</i>	Opportunity to provide	Once a month per	Subscribers which

newsletters	news and information on a range of council services that are of interest to subscribers (information sharing with option to give feedback)	topic – 3-4 newsletters a week	includes residents, businesses, partner agencies, staff, members, parish councils
Publications	Opportunity to provide information on council services and service-specific news and events. Publications include Uttlesford Life, Housing News, WOW newsletter, Taxi Chat (information sharing with options to give feedback)	Varying	Residents and businesses (Uttlesford Life); council tenants and leaseholders (Housing News); sheltered housing residents (WOW newsletter) ; members of the taxi trade (Taxi Chat)