

Community Engagement Strategy 2024-2027



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V 0.2	Head of Place, Property and Regeneration and Senior Management Team	9.2.24	Amendments to make requirements and responsibilities clear and some minor amendments to wording
V. 0.3	Senior Management Team	7.3.24	Minor amendments made following consideration by SMT.

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1. Introduction from our Chief Executive

Welcome to our Community Engagement Strategy (2024 – 2027)



The aim of this strategy is to align our engagement with our citizens and stakeholders with the delivery of our priorities and vision of the Council.

Our vision is:

”North Devon will be a sustainable, inclusive community; fostering prosperity and well being for all”.

Engaging, talking and consulting with our citizens and stakeholders will inform our decisions, priorities, vision and delivery of excellent services. We also believe that by building a stronger two way dialogue with our citizens and stakeholders will help the Council to continually improve its delivery of services and help to shape our future priorities.

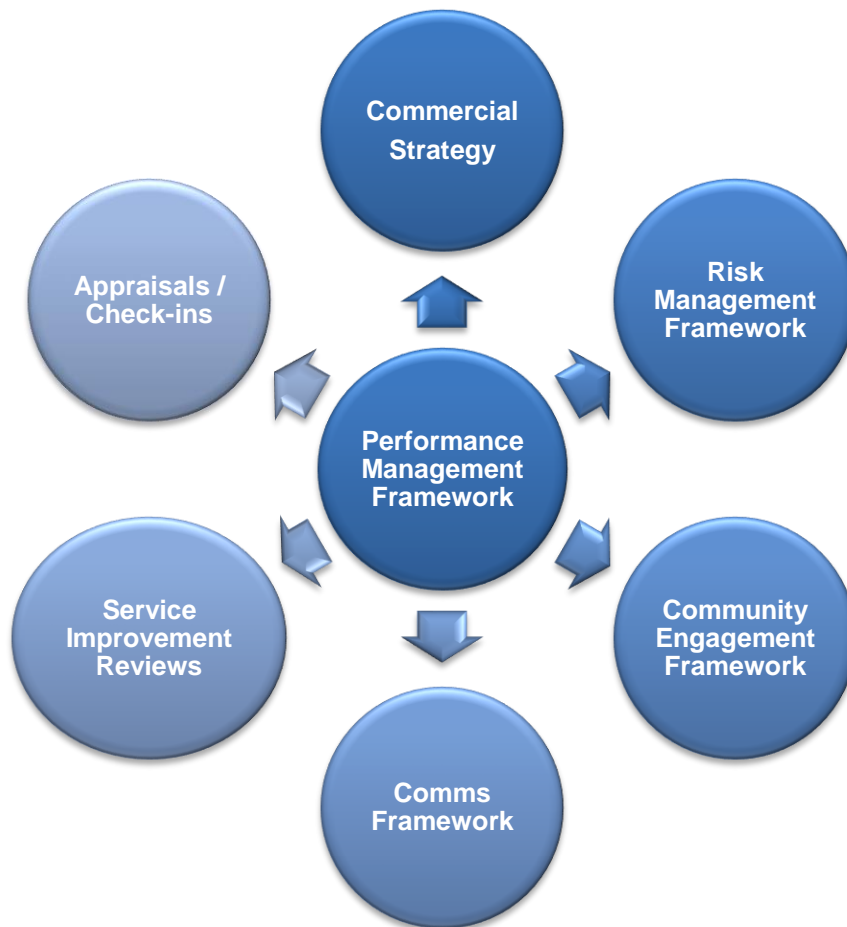
Consultation and engagement is the responsibility of all of our officers and councillors supported by the Corporate and Community Services team.

We have set out our business and priorities within our [Corporate Plan](#). As a Council we have an ambitious range of priorities, and actions that are necessary to deliver them, which are as follows:

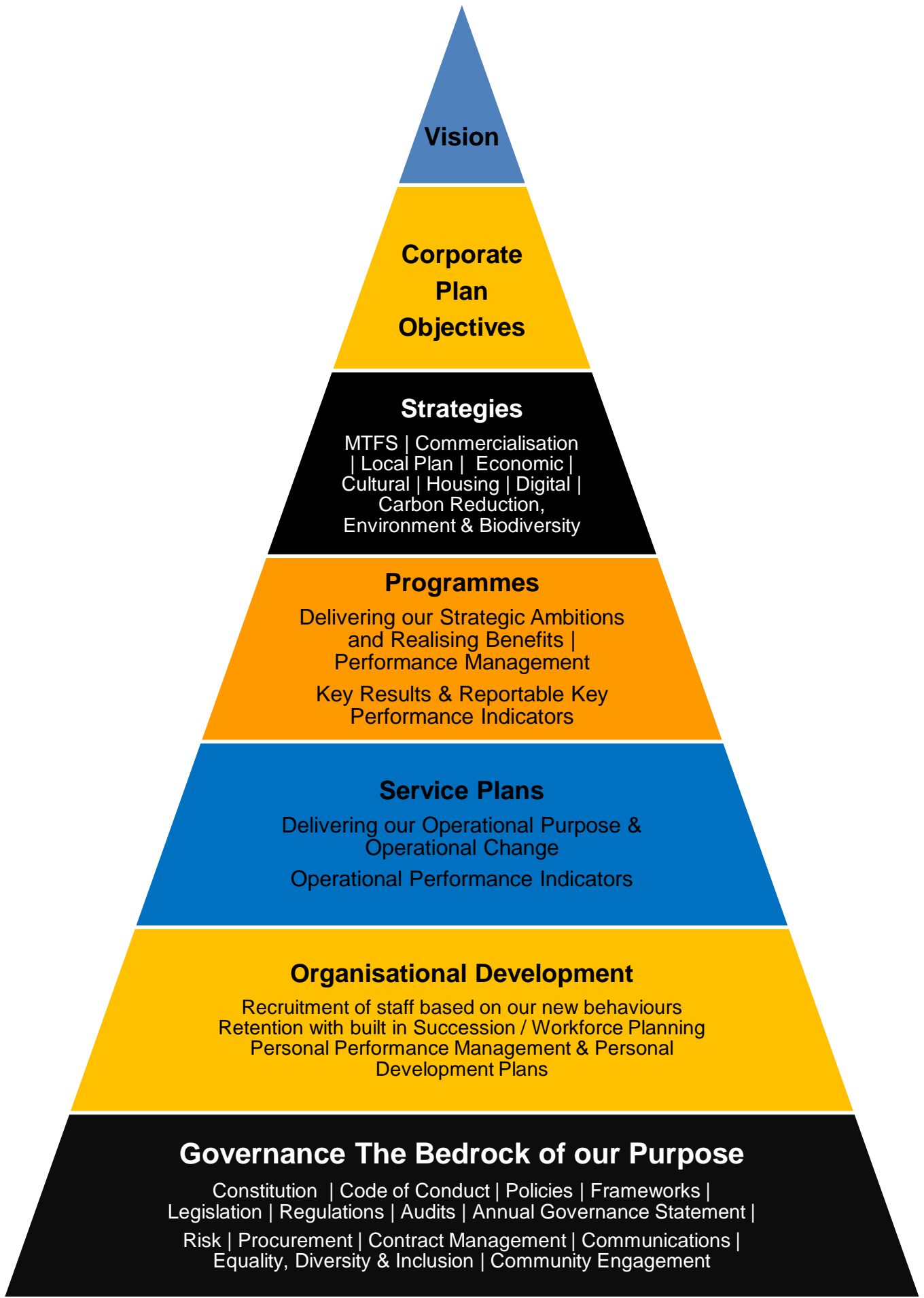
1. To reduce the reliance on core funding government grant whilst maintaining financial security by managing the council in a prudent manner, taking opportunities to increase income and by being risk aware and not risk adverse.
2. We will strategically plan and deliver housing provision to try to meet local needs and to tackle the widening imbalance between supply and demand and increase the availability of decent, affordable and accessible accommodation for residents in need.
3. To protect and enhance our natural environment and to promote sustainable practices, reduce carbon emissions, tackle climate change and protect biodiversity within the council’s jurisdiction.
4. To promote economic development, support the regeneration of our Places and improve the quality of life for residents and visitors by making North Devon a more attractive, vibrant and successful area; and

5. To be seen as a vibrant, attractive employer by being an ambitious and caring council that develops and looks after its communities and delivers excellent customer focussed services that meet the needs of its residents.

Sitting below the Corporate Plan, we have our internal Performance Management Framework and aligned to that, this strategy is a key component to ensure that we are talking and listening to our citizens as we want to be open and transparent. We believe the heart of this is effective engagement and consultation with our citizens. We will continue to provide citizens with opportunities to help shape how we deliver on our key priorities.



In the pyramid on the following page, you will see that community engagement forms one of the bedrocks of our organisation. The views of our citizens and stakeholders are fed back up through the organisation to inform our decision making, improve the delivery of our services and inform our future priorities.



This strategy contributes to the Council's overarching Communications Strategy. It also contributes to our Equality Strategy and we will consider the needs of our citizens in light of their particular protected characteristics in our decisions, priorities, vision and delivery of services.

We want our elected members and decision makers to have meaningful information that allows them to question and make informed decisions.

Whilst we cannot guarantee that our citizens and stakeholders will always agree with our decisions, this strategy is designed to improve the way we engage and involve all communities in our decision making.

This strategy will be reviewed on a regular basis, at least every three years.

If you have any questions about this document or suggestions for improvement, feel free to contact the Corporate and Community Services team on 01271 388253 or by emailing memberservices@northdevon.gov.uk

Ken Miles
Chief Executive

2. Our Principles for Consultation and Engagement

Consulting and engaging with our citizens and stakeholders gives local people a voice and an opportunity to have a say on important decisions. We will listen to, and learn from, these views and opinions before decisions are made or priorities are set. This will also include Residents' Surveys.

Consultation and engagement is undertaken using different methods to find out what residents think about significant changes or proposals that affect them.

Our consultations will have a clear beginning, middle and end, however they can also be part of an ongoing period of engagement. Consultation will only be used if there is an opportunity to influence decision making.

Engagement with our citizens and stakeholders is broader. It can include community campaigns or interventions or asking the community for action and involvement. At other points it will mean seeking insight into what local people think and feel. It increasingly involves using digital technologies, and seeks to make services more responsive to citizens needs. Engagement also helps the Council to carry out its community leadership role.

To ensure we are consistent in our approach in our consultation and engagement activities they must be carried out fairly and we will follow these principles:

1. **Be clear about what we're doing** – ensure that citizens and stakeholders understand when we are consulting or engaging with them and how their comments will help to inform decisions. We will set out the wider responsibilities of the Council, how it links to the Council's priorities and any financial implications. We will ensure that the consultation and engagement is necessary and valuable, making it clear from the outset our challenges, what we can and cannot do and explain the reasons why in our communication.
2. **Have a co-ordinated and planned approach** - to avoid duplication and overlapping within the Council and with other stakeholders, community and voluntary groups. Allow sufficient time to carefully plan activities in terms of resources, time, internal and external communications and analysis of results. Within the life of this strategy, the Corporate and Community Services team will develop links with our partners such as One Northern Devon and Northern Devon Voluntary Service to ensure that consultation and engagement is co-ordinated and joined up, sharing resources where possible.
3. **Be timely** - ensure that activities take place when there is opportunity to have a say before a decision is taken, allow a reasonable amount of time to respond and for their views to be fully considered before any action or decision is made.
4. **Be inclusive** – provide opportunities for all people to engage ensuring that our plans and processes reflect the different needs of the communities. Our Communications team will use a wide range of methods and channels to ensure that citizens and stakeholders are made aware. We will also use more traditional channels and methods to ensure that it's inclusive. The Corporate and Community Team will monitor responses and take action to improve response rates if required.
5. **Be accessible** – we will aim to ensure that activities are accessible by being easy to understand and targeted to those people we need to reach by using the most appropriate consultation method(s). Prior to undertaking consultation, the Corporate and Community Services Team will help the lead officer map the stakeholders to be targeted

6. **Be accountable** - ensure responses are recorded, analysed and used to inform decision making and we will aim to provide clear feedback to participants and stakeholders on the outcome of the consultation and decision making in a timely manner. The Corporate and Community Services team will provide the lead officer with the outcomes and summary of the results for further analysis.
7. **Review** – evaluate to check that the consultation has achieved its objectives, how the views have been considered as part of the Council’s decision and lessons that can be learned to improve future activities and response rates.

3. Why do we Engage and Consult?

We will engage and consult with our citizens and stakeholders to help develop and improve services and policies that affect their communities and to build trusted relationships with our citizens.

Consultation is a formal process, over a defined period (typically a minimum of 6 weeks), to seek and take into consideration the views of our citizens on specific proposals in advance of a decision being taken. Consultations are undertaken when we are formally asking for views to help inform decision makers and is a lawful process to understand views and preferences on each of the viable options proposed. Formal consultation is required if it relates to a change in a service (move, closure or how it is delivered), policy or is a statutory requirement.) Citizens and stakeholders inform decisions, but do not have the final say. We have a legal duty to consult our citizens on issues such as planning and licensing (**further information is available on NDC website**). Statutory consultations are bound by legal requirements and have strict rules surrounding how they should be conducted which we will make clear as part of the consultation.

Consultation will only be used if there is an opportunity to influence decision making. When considering if consultation is required, we will consider the following:

- Is there a statutory duty to consult?
- Have we promised to consult and therefore a legitimate expectation?
- Have we established a practice of consultation or have there been consultations on the same service by others?
- Would it be considered unfair not to consult?

Engagement is a more participatory approach to help citizens and other stakeholders to shape the Council’s activities. Engagement will be used to seek feedback on existing services being delivered or a current policy, develop thinking and ideas, gain an understanding of the potential impact of options being explored and to invite other ideas for consideration. Engagement may be initiated by communities themselves or by the Council. It can be used for small local service changes (such as improvements to play equipment) as well as for large projects (such as large scale regeneration projects) and can take place at different stages of the design process:

- At the project initiation phase – engagement can provide insight about citizens and other stakeholders concerns, ideas and priorities.
- Ongoing engagement – can help to define and shortlist opportunities and options through feedback, co-production or co-design, leading to one or more specific proposals which may then be subject to a formal consultation.
- After a project or service change has been implemented, engagement can be valuable to review user satisfaction and identify if any further changes are needed.

By involving citizens and other stakeholders in shaping Council services, engagement can help

to build community ownership, gain public understanding and support for changes. By involving citizens and other stakeholders at an early stage enables their views to influence a design from the outset.

Consultation and engagement will help ensure that the decisions we take:

1. Are informed by public opinion
2. Reflect and respond to the needs of local people; and
3. Are transparent and accountable.

Where there is no scope for citizens and other stakeholders to influence a decision (such as once a decision has been made or where there is legal requirement to make changes), we will be proactive and communicate these messages to our citizens and other stakeholders using a multi-prong approach as set out in the Communications Strategy.

4. How will we will improve our engagement and consultation?

There are more than 96,000 citizens in North Devon and many other people use services provided by the Council when they travel into North Devon for work or leisure. We want to hear from as many people as possible who may be affected by the changes we make and to help shape and improve our services. Currently, we hear from approximately 1-3 % of North Devon citizens through our consultations and engagement processes.

In line with our **Equality Strategy**, we will seek the views of all citizens and other stakeholders regarding the Council's services as follows, we will:

- **Work with partner organisations, colleagues and councillors** to expand the reach of the Council's publicity around consultations and engagement, we will:
 - Work in partnership with equalities groups, partner organisations, community and voluntary sectors and businesses that represent communities and the whole of North Devon to reach more citizens and stakeholders throughout their networks.
 - The Corporate and Community Services team will work with the Communications Team to develop resources to help councillors promote consultations and engagements in their wards and seeks Councillors views on solutions to address low response rates from communities that they represent. The resources may include sharing of social media posts with their community, providing posters or leaflets and paper copies of surveys to be made available within their communities.
 - Encourage colleagues working for the Council in other areas to help publicise relevant consultations and engagements through their contacts. The Corporate and Community Services team will do this by liaising with appropriate service areas within the Council and liaising with the Communications team for publicising within the monthly Staff newsletter.
 - Within the life of this strategy, the Corporate and Community Services team will work towards the creation of, maintaining and sharing of a consultation and engagement forward plan to help the Council, partner organisations, Councillors and colleagues to plan their resource to respond to and promote Council consultations and engagements.
 - The Corporate and Community Services team will develop and maintain details of organisations, equalities and community and voluntary groups (within the Data Protection regulations) and provide advice on stakeholder mapping to officers undertaking engagement and consultation.

- **Innovate and target consultation and engagement resources** where this will have the greatest impact. The Corporate and Community Services Team will:
 - Prior to undertaking consultation, along with the Communications Team work with the Lead Officer at an early stage to determine which areas of the community and stakeholders need to be targeted by undertaking stakeholder mapping. This will also include targeting of organisations, community and voluntary groups and other stakeholders as required. A communication and involvement plan will also be produced to identify stakeholders and when and how they will be involved.
 - Identify which partner organisations might be best placed to help and support
 - Target resources at publicity methods which are most effective at increasing response rates from the relevant audiences. We will regularly review procedures with the view to update and develop new practices as technology develops.
 - Aim to evolve new ways of encouraging people to participate in consultations and engagements, drawing on best practice from other local authorities, our experiences and using new and different ways to engage both in person and remotely. To achieve this, we will regularly review procedures with the view to update and develop new practices as technology develops.
 - Aim to develop and maintain a list of subscribers who wish to be notified of the Council's consultations (within the Data Protection regulations)
- **Ensure those who are most impacted by proposals are fully engaged.** As well as increasing overall response rates, we will focus efforts on communities and stakeholders that are likely to be affected most by proposals. This may be because of where they live or work or how they use an area or because they are users or providers of a specific service affected by the proposals. We will:
 - Aim to adapt our approach to local needs. Where a consultation or engagement is relevant to a particular area or community, we will adapt methods of engagement and promotion to ensure they are relevant to people living and working in that area and to ensure local voices are heard.
 - Aim to ensure that there are early conversations with those most impacted by the proposals.

5. Reaching diverse communities

Previously the Council has not collated data from people who respond to our consultations and engagements. We now include questions within all of our consultations to collate this data so that we have a better understanding on whether responses are evenly distributed across all demographic groups and communities in North Devon.

When we consult and engage, we want to hear from citizens and other stakeholders from all backgrounds, with diverse perspectives and different experiences of living in North Devon to make sure that our proposals do not inadvertently disadvantage some people.

We will aim to:

- **Design publicity and consultation/engagement methods to reach citizens in all communities and from demographic groups which are under-represented in responses.** The Corporate and Community Services Team will:
 - Regularly review recent consultation and engagements to identify which publicity and engagement methods are most effective for each of North Devon's communities and demographics. We will do this by the inclusion of a user satisfaction question in all consultation and engagement surveys asking for

feedback.

- Monitor live consultations and use specific targeted methods during the remainder of the consultation or engagement to increase participation in communities or demographic groups where there are low response rates.
- Work with the Council's communications team to try new methods of publicity and engagement which are more digestible and engaging.
- Work with and build our relationships with equalities groups, partner organisations, community and voluntary sectors that represent citizens that are under-represented.
- Where resources allow, we will consider going to where people are, such as attending existing events and activities (i.e. North Devon Show), rather than expecting people to come to us.
- **Monitor deprivation and the protected characteristics of respondents** to consultations compared to the proportions for each group living in North Devon, so that we can target efforts to increase participation by under-represented groups.
- **Continually review our approach to equalities monitoring** used in surveys to reflect best practice and feedback from equalities groups and consider how this can be achieved within new technology solutions.

6. Methods of consultation

We will aim to adapt how we approach consultation and engagement depending on the topic. We will use a wide range of communication methods and channels to ensure that citizens and stakeholders are made aware. We will also use more traditional channels and methods to ensure that it's inclusive by working closely with our Communications team

For formal consultations, we will:

- Produce an online survey on the Council's website and a paper version of a survey which will be made available at the Council offices and other public locations as appropriate. The survey will clearly set out the reasons for the consultation, timeframe for responses to be made and when to expect to receive feedback on the outcome of the consultation and decision making. It will also set out the wider responsibilities of the Council, how its linked to the Council's priorities and financial implications. If its part of a wider area of work of the Council, we will clearly set out how it is linked.
- If it's a statutory consultation, a notice may also be required to be placed in a local newspaper which will clearly set out the reasons for the consultation and the timeframe for consultations to be made.
- Where appropriate we will arrange public events (such as exhibitions or meetings) at appropriate and accessible locations within the community such as public buildings.
- Where appropriate we will go to where people are, such as attending existing events and activities, rather than expecting people to come to us.

For engagement, our aim is to:

- Produce short polls to obtain opinions and feedback on specific service areas of the Council following a request by a lead officer.
- Use our digital channels and create accounts for specific campaigns where appropriate. Social media provides us with a two way opportunity to directly engage with our citizens and respond to messages.
- Where appropriate, we will attend existing community events and activities as face to face interaction is one of the most effective ways to engage with people. We currently attend the annual North Devon Show, North Devon Homes' summer fayre, recruitment fayres and other ad-hoc pop up events.
- Hold Parish Forums to engage with Parish and Town Councils to relay key messages. These forums allow our officers the opportunity to discuss project, plans and services. We aim to hold one or two a year meetings.
- Hold an annual engagement event for local businesses

7. Clear and Accessible information

We want to make it as easy as possible for people to take part in consultations and engagements. As part of this, we need to ensure that our information and surveys are clear and easy to understand.

Increasingly respondents are completing surveys online, and we will make online materials accessible through the use of alt text and captions for videos.

Paper copies of surveys will be made available and **accessible alternative formats may also be available.**

We will aim to:

- **Ensure all consultations are accessible:**
 - Consultation and engagement surveys and supporting information will be provided in plain English with a clear structure and, where possible, will be tailored to the needs of the target audience, in terms of complexity and length; language and tone; design look and feel; and communication channels.
 - Where possible we will endeavour to undertake user testing of surveys and supporting information before the start of a consultation or engagement. This may include review by relevant equalities groups.
 - Where possible, information and surveys will be made available, on request, in alternative formats by the service leading the consultation or engagement. Consultation and engagement materials will include details of how to request alternative formats. We will identify at the planning stage if proposals are likely to affect people with specific access needs and if alternative formats or other approaches are needed from the outset. In terms of language, this can include translation via paper or email.
 - Officers planning consultation and engagement events will identify what reasonable adjustments are required to enable citizens with access needs to participate. This may include adjustments for hidden disability (examples of a hidden disability include neurological differences such as Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Colour-blindness, ADHD, Dyscalculia, Autism, or Tourette Syndrome. These may require adjustments such as making sure communication is clear, concise and unambiguous; setting out timescales to give sufficient advance notice; or managing any known issues around anxiety or sensory sensitivities for face-to-face meetings).
- **Monitor user feedback on how clear and accessible respondents find our surveys.**

We will include a user satisfaction question in all consultation and engagement surveys which will ask respondents to rate the following aspects of the survey:

 - There is enough information about the proposals for me to answer the questions;
 - The questions make it easy for me to give my views;
 - The survey meets my accessibility needs.

8. Decision making and communicating outcomes

We recognise that citizens and other stakeholders make a considerable effort in responding to consultations and engagements and want to know how their feedback and ideas influence decisions.

Publication of consultation and engagement feedback on the final output and on the subsequent outcomes is one of the Local Government Association's (New Conversations – LGA Guide to Engagement) key aspects for good consultation and engagement.

When engagement is used to help develop the next stage of a project, there may not be a formal decision made in public. Nevertheless, it is important that citizens and other stakeholders are kept informed about how their feedback is being used and what the next steps are.

We will aim to:

- **Include a report summarising the consultation feedback, equality impact assessment and demographic data** in the information that is presented to the decision maker by the Lead Officer so that they can make an informed decision. Where a formal decision is made by a Committee of the Council this report will be publicly available on the Council's website ([Committee information](#)).
- **Publish reports and decisions made by committees of the Council** on the Council's website as above.
- **Include a statement within all consultation and engagement surveys advising "what happens next"** so that citizens and stakeholders know how their responses can influence the outcomes, and at what other stages they will be able to review and comment.
- **Publish "We Asked, You Said, We Did" updates** for all consultations and engagements on the Council's website ([Consultations](#)). This will include a record of the consultation or engagement (We Asked), a summary of the feedback we received (You Said) and details of the decision made to implement, amend or abandon the proposals (We Did). Where the outcomes of consultation or engagement are the responsibility of another partner, we will detail which organisation has this responsibility and share this information as appropriate with the organisation for their consideration (within Data Protection Regulations). For example if there is feedback in relation to a particular highway, we will share this feedback with Devon County Council as the Highways Authority for their consideration.
- **Provide updates using our communication channels** to citizens, other stakeholders and the media about consultation and engagement feedback and decisions. This will also include Councillors who have a valuable role in helping to make citizens aware of consultations or engagements taking place, how they can influence decisions and updates on decisions that are made.
- **Work with other teams in the Council to ensure that there is feedback to users of their service** about the outcomes of engagement and consultations that affect them.