
Consultation and Engagement Framework

November 2020

Inform

Consult

Belfast City Council

Listen

Involve



Belfast
City Council

Purpose of the Framework

Belfast City Council is committed to listening to what our residents have to say about the services we provide or what they want to see happen in the city and their local area. We recognise that to effectively shape and improve our city, neighbourhoods and services, then meaningful consultation and engagement is crucial. We believe that listening to and involving people will lead to better, more responsive services and improved quality of life for all.

We have developed a consultation and engagement framework to guide how we listen, consult and involve people. This, together with our toolkit, will help ensure that our consultation and engagement is meaningful and effective; that it makes a difference.

Why the Framework is needed

If we want the public to be more involved in our consultations and engagements, then we need to build trust and confidence in our systems and continually improve how we do things. We believe that helping people understand why we consult and engage and what they can expect from us is the first step in building that trust and confidence. We also believe that setting out best practice principles and standards will help us improve and consistently deliver good practice. Therefore, this framework sets out our vision for consultation and engagement and the principles and standards that we will strive to meet. More importantly, by putting civic engagement and participation at the heart of what we do, it will ensure our residents are more involved in the decisions or services that affect them.

Legal Requirements, Equality and Best Practice

The framework has been developed based on current legal requirements and best practice. Where there is a defined statutory process for consultation, then the statutory process will take precedence. For example, requirements to consult on spatial planning issues will be undertaken in line with the Planning Act (NI) 2011 legislation and associated statutory guidance.

It represents a further step towards embedding meaningful consultation into the council's planning and decision-making processes and supplements the commitments in our Equality Scheme and our responsibilities to consult under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Supported by an action plan and toolkit, the framework

Our Vision for Consultation & Engagement

We are committed to listening to and involving local people in decisions and issues that affect them. Our vision for consultation and engagement is where:

Everyone feels that their opinion matters and that their voice can make a difference

Making Belfast a good place to live, work or visit requires a collaborative effort so our approach to consultation and engagement aims to ensure that everyone, and especially those who live here, have an opportunity to influence:

- ✓ **Council services and priorities** – so they better reflect local need and provide best value for money
- ✓ **Local actions and decisions** – so they make the greatest impact and improve local **quality of life** now and for the future.

By everyone, we mean:



Underpinning this vision is our commitment to ensure that all voices have an opportunity to be heard, particularly those who may find it more difficult to participate because of disability, age, language, caring responsibilities or any other circumstance. Our consultation will be guided by the principles contained in the Equality Commissions guidance “Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 – A Guide for Public Authorities (April 2010)” and our Equality Scheme - chapter 3, ‘Our arrangements for consulting’.

Aims and Aspirations

The framework is intended to help us to deliver our vision for consultation and engagement and ensure that all our consultation and engagement meets legal standards and good practice commitments. More specifically the framework aims to:

- Make our consultation and engagement processes **Meaningful and Fit for Purpose**
- Ensure our consultation and engagement is **Inclusive** and gives all people **Equal Opportunity** to contribute, enabling greater access and participation
- Build trust and confidence in council through **Fair, Open and Transparent** consultation and engagement
- Provide **Value for Money**, reducing costs and avoiding duplication
- Strengthen strategic planning through a consistent and continually improving use of consultation and engagement - **A 'One-Council' Coordinated Approach**

Our aspiration is to ensure that our consultation and engagement

1. **Values and respects people** and acts fairly – it has a meaningful purpose and values people's time and contributions
2. Gives people **equal opportunity** to contribute – it is clear, accessible and inclusive
3. Uses **fit for purpose** methods - it is well designed, visible and commensurate to need
4. **Keeps people informed** throughout – it gives people the information they need to participate and informs them of the outcome (key findings, decisions or actions).

These aspirations or principles form the basis of our framework and approach to consultation and engagement.

Through this framework, we will endeavour to embed a culture of engagement so that it genuinely becomes part of what we do.

Definition - What do we mean by Consultation and Engagement?

The terms consultation and engagement are sometimes used interchangeably. But, whilst both processes seek the views, knowledge or guidance of others, there is a difference between them.

The Consultation Institute defines **consultation** as:

“the dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views, with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action”

In this framework, we define **engagement** as an activity or process that:

“brings people together to help to understand and solve local problems, to influence and shape council policy or council services, or to address issues of common importance and to achieve positive change”

Consultation is specific and time bound, with decisions made by the organisation initiating the consultation, in this case Belfast City Council. Engagement, on the other hand, describes the wider and longer term or ongoing process of **involving** people - in discussions, deliberations and action planning – on issues that affect them or which they care about. Effective engagement requires respectful dialogue between everyone involved and is aimed at improving understanding and, where appropriate, joint working so as to achieve more positive outcomes for all.

Our Definitions:

Consultation - a process of dialogue - asking for and listening to the views of people and partners in order to inform or influence a specific council decision, policy, strategy or action.

Engagement - the processes we use to develop ongoing, mutually beneficial working relationships with our people and partners. For the purposes of this framework the term engagement means the purposeful and participative process which enables people to influence and shape council policy and local services or to improve local outcomes. It is the cornerstone of partnership working.

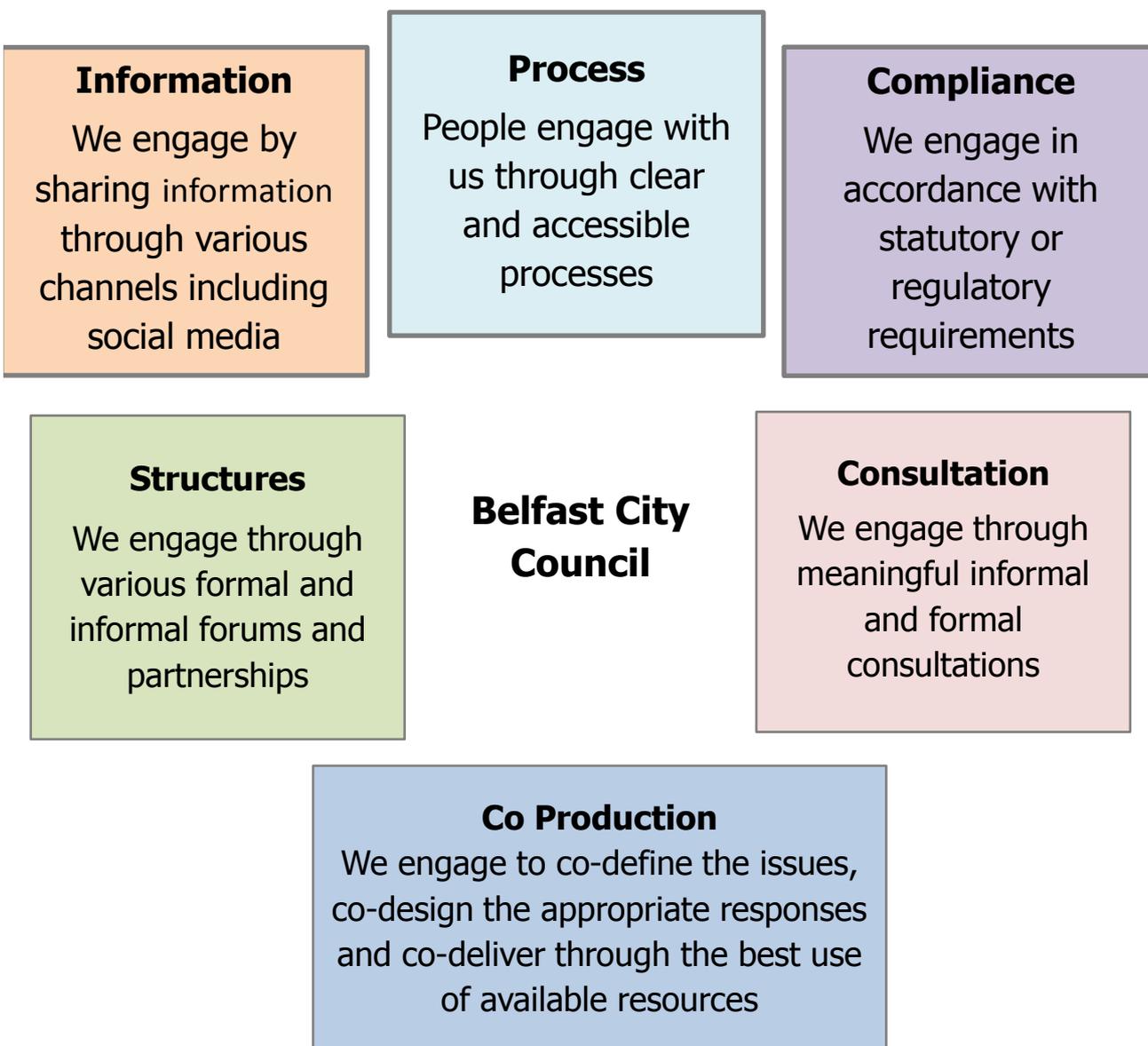
Involvement - People actively participating in and being involved with council and other local service providers in policy development, service planning and review or improving outcomes. Depending on the nature of the issue, decisions may be taken solely by council or may be shared.

The level of involvement will vary depending on the nature of each consultation or engagement. There is no fixed approach. To help explain the potential different levels of involvement, public bodies have adapted the 'ladder of public engagement' concept as illustrated below. Within this spectrum, there are many different methods available, and we must choose what is the most appropriate based on each individual case.

Level of Involvement		What's involved	Examples	
Empower	High / Most involved	You do it; we stand back – enabling others to deliver programmes and services	Shaftsbury and Grosvenor community & recreation centres	
Collaborate		We do it jointly – sharing decisions and working together to improve, design or services and programmes	District Policing & Community Safety Partnership Connswater Community Greenway	
Involve		Involving people – working directly with people to understand needs and aspirations and/or to improve or design services and programmes	Forums and user groups such as 'friends of' groups and our youth, seniors and migrant forums. Engagement as part of our physical programme	
Consultation		We want to know what you think in order to help us make a better decision – asking people for their views	Formal consultations and focus groups such as those undertaken as part of our Waste Collection Arrangements and Cultural Strategy	
Information-giving		Low / Least involved	This is knowledge we want you to have - giving people information and telling them about our services	Council Website City Matters

Our Consultation and Engagement Framework

Belfast City Council engages and involves people in a number of different ways.



Inherent within each of these approaches, is a commitment to equality and our duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Our Standards for Consultation

We recognise that there is no fixed approach or one right way to consult. Instead, we will adapt each consultation to suit its own each unique situation. To help us make the right decisions about how and when we consult, we have adopted five consultation standards. These underpin our vision and guide all our consultation activity.

Belfast City Council – Our Consultation Commitments

Our consultation standard set out what you can expect from Belfast City Council consultations. These are our commitments to you. In any consultation exercise we will:

Explain why we are consulting and how we are going to take people’s views into account. We will consult openly and with integrity, providing the information people need to participate and ensuring that we consult and engage when there is scope for people to influence decisions and actions.

Involve the widest spectrum of the community. We will strive to give all people affected by or interested in the matter an opportunity to get involved. We will strive to give all people an equal opportunity to contribute especially under-represented, marginalised and ‘seldom heard groups. Above all, we will respect people and act fairly, valuing people’s time and contributions.

Organise consultation and engagement in ways that are convenient and accessible to the people whose views we are seeking and use the most appropriate and cost-effective mechanisms – fit for purpose consultation that is commensurate to need.

Report back and keep people informed throughout the process – providing information that is open and easy to understand. This includes reporting back on what people told us, the decisions that have been made and any actions that will be taken.

Use the findings to make informed decisions - consultation for a purpose and with an honest intention. We will interpret the findings fairly and make decisions or take actions that ultimately help to improve services, programmes or quality of life for local people.

We have developed a toolkit to help officers apply these standards. The toolkit, which will be updated periodically to reflect ne practice and learning, includes comprehensive advice on planning a consultation, has been developed

Our Standards for Engagement

Engagement brings people together to help to solve local problems, to influence and shape policy or council services or to address issues of common importance and bring about positive change.

Whilst our consultation standards are equally applicable to engagement activity, we feel that additional guidance and support is needed to build and drive meaningful community engagement. We want communities to feel that they can influence and be part of the decisions that affect them. This means working with communities to help them deal with the issues they experience, involving them in the design and delivery of actions and interventions, and supporting them so they can lead on the issues that affect them. Good community engagement is a process which provides the foundation for:

- Shared understanding
- Improved decision-making
- Collaboration

Engagement good practice is continually evolving and we are committed to learning and maintaining good standards that work for our local communities. In the first instance, we will apply the National Standards for Community Engagement as developed by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Community Development Centre. The standards, which build on the OECD principles designed to strengthen government-citizen relations, are about being open and inclusive, with a focus on collaborative change, continuous improvement and relationship building. They comprise seven good-practice principles, supported by detailed performance statements that act as a checklist or reference point for best practice. The standards focus on:

- ❖ Inclusion
- ❖ Support
- ❖ Planning
- ❖ Working Together
- ❖ Methods
- ❖ Communication
- ❖ Impact

By applying these standards to our own community engagement, we aim to ensure that our engagement is meaningful and effective - where everyone feels respected and empowered and which delivers a positive outcome for all.

The Belfast Agenda

We are responsible for leading and facilitating the community planning process for the Belfast district area. At its heart, community planning is about working in collaboration to deliver better outcomes for local people. We will work with our community planning partners to embed effective community engagement and ensure that is an integral part the Belfast Agenda and our community planning processes. The Belfast Community Planning Partnership is committed to strengthening how it engages and has plans to develop a Partnership Community Engagement Strategy to underpin how it will enhance civic voice through meaningful participation of communities, including the community, voluntary and social enterprise sectors.

We will continue to work with our partners to test and develop innovative engagement approaches and to develop case studies to guide and build good practice, both through our own consultation and engagement activity in relation to Council services, and through our partnership working.

Learning from best practice: Scottish National Standards



Keeping you informed

Our framework commits us to keeping you informed. This means letting you know what is happening and telling you about the decisions that affect you and how you can have a say in those decisions. We will also let you know how we tool people's views into account and what happened as a result.

We use a range of mechanisms to keep you informed. This includes, for example, tools like City Matters, our website and social media. Depending on the issue or matter, we may also produce specific leaflets or summary documents to help raise awareness and understanding. These will be available on our dedicated engagement platform or on the council website.

Our Consultation and Engagement Platform

We are continually looking for ways in which to improve how we engage and involve people. As part of this, we have invested in digital technology and have created a dedicated on-line engagement platform. The aim of the platform is to make it easier for our residents and other stakeholders to find out about our engagements and to have their say. We will also use the platform to keep people informed by letting you know what people have said and what has happened as a result.

Developing effective process

Our framework is about giving all people a voice through clear, meaningful and inclusive processes. Whilst much of the framework deals with how we initiate, plan and deliver our consultation and engagement, we also want to make sure that we have sound processes in place that enables communities and individuals to initiate discussions and raise concerns.

Our Elected Members play an important role in representing their constituents, including raising issues of concern with services and senior management team. However, in addition to this, we will also develop clear and open processes that enable people to contact council directly, such as through petitions or other mechanisms. We will explain clearly what the process is so that people understand how they can make their voice heard and what happens next.

Meeting our commitments

We have developed a number of supporting mechanisms to enable us to meet the commitments set out in this framework. Reviewed and updated on an annual review, it includes an annual action plan and officer toolkits and best practice guidance.

Toolkits and Guidance

We have developed a consultation and engagement toolkit for officers and engagement guidance for physical projects. This guidance and associated checklists will be reviewed regularly to ensure it reflects best practice and changing legislative guidance.

In addition, our Equality and Diversity Unit has developed an Equality and Diversity Toolkit, which provides detailed guidance for officers on our equality and diversity responsibilities. The unit also facilitates a number of equality and disability forums. These are reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure we continue to be open and inclusive. To find out more about these forums or to get involved please contact equality@belfastcity.gov.uk

Annual Review and Action Plan

As part of the development of the framework, we identified 4 key areas that we need to focus on if we are to improve our practice and deliver the aspirations within this framework. These will form the basis of our annual review and updated action plan:

Consultation & Engagement Framework
Year 1: Formal adoption and promotion of the framework Ongoing: Annual monitoring and review to assess new practice and ensure continuous improvement and innovation
Consultation
Year 1: Introduce mechanisms for feeding back the results and impact of consultations to participants Ongoing: Annual monitoring and review to ensure our consultation practice continue to meet legislative requirements and good practice
Engagement and Civic Voice
Year 1: Introduce mechanisms to enhance our civic and community engagement, with initial focus on an online engagement platform to support more open and inclusive dialogue Ongoing: Ongoing review and development of innovative and good practice civic engagement to ensure wider participation and involvement
Building Capacity
Continuous programme of support and capacity building for officers - officer toolkit, C&E champions and internal networking, training and professional development.

Measures of Success

We want this framework to make a difference. We want people get involved in the decisions that affect them and we want it to have a positive impact on how people view the council. To help us assess whether it is making a difference, we will monitor the following:

How much did we do?	How well did we do it
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Number of public consultations per annum ❖ Number of responses to our consultation per annum ❖ Number of focus groups or engagement panel exercises per annum (face-to face or online) ❖ Numbers involved in focus groups and panels per annum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ % of consultation exercises where results are fed back to participants ❖ Participation by key groups (age, gender, background etc) ❖ Number of FOIs / complaints relating to consultation and engagement process* ❖ Officers holding Consultation Institute CPD or Advanced Practitioners
Is anyone better off?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ % of residents who agree that the council consults with and listens to views of local residents ✓ % of residents who agree that they are able to have a say in how services are run in their local area ✓ % of residents who rate council highly in terms of (a) reputation and (b) trustworthiness ✓ % of residents who agree that the council provides good customer service <p style="text-align: right;">Source: BCC Resident Survey</p>	

Tell us what you think

We have put a lot of thought into this framework, but we are very much open to ideas and suggestions for improvement.

This framework is about making sure that people have a voice on the issues that affect them and can influence the services we deliver. If you have any comments or suggestions, please get in touch with us using the contact details below.

Does this make sense?

Are we on the right track?

What do we need to do to make it easier for people to get involved and have their say?



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