



Harlow District Council

Embedding Community Engagement Through Change

Introduction

This tool has been developed to support Harlow Council in its efforts to embed engagement within its working practices throughout the organisation. It is designed to be accessible to staff and councillors and to help them to consider engagement implications and opportunities in work they are undertaking.

The tool is based on a model of continuous engagement, with a clear engagement narrative that articulates the importance of engagement in the authority. There are three elements to this:

1. Engagement mandate

The engagement narrative set out the authority's fundamental aims around engagement. This tool can help to ensure that engagement possibilities are considered at the outset of any project or initiative. Many of the points involve thinking about how this will fit in with wider council objectives, and how it might impact on residents and stakeholders. This helps to ensure that the work can be justified and receive support both internally and by external stakeholders.

2. Planning for engagement

Once the Engagement Mandate has been agreed, more practical planning for any engagement elements can begin. This tool focuses on the practicalities of undertaking engagement work, from initial resourcing through to the methods and impact it will have. There needs to be an explicit commitment to this step from the start, as it is on this that the work's success will be judged by the wider community.

3. Evaluation

It is vital to take a step back and evaluate what you have done. Evaluation should not be confined to after the project – it should be continuous. The steps outlined in this tool can be applied to stages throughout the project. At very least this gives structure to the final, post project evaluation, which needs to follow swiftly after the completion of Mandate and Planning stages.

For each of these elements there is a grid of actions below, to help think through a change within a service department or team. You can use the middle column to tick off the stages or write in the outcomes.

The tool can be adapted and built upon depending on the particular circumstances of the change you're trying to create.

Engagement mandate

Key questions	Outcome	Things to think about and build in
What changes, adaptations or developments are you proposing?		What is your model of governance? If you are a council looking for continuous engagement, then do you already have engagement routes on this service? If not, how do you relate this service to the users? How can you place and test these changes against people's needs?
How do these changes contribute to the overall objectives of the council?		Cross-reference against the Harlow Engagement Narrative.
Has there been any involvement or participation from stakeholders? (Y/N)		If there has been engagement before it needs to be built upon and incorporated. If there hasn't then the need to engage becomes all the more important.
What is the impact likely to be on people's day-to-day experience?		Do you know how people will be impacted? If people are significantly impacted, acting without engagement may damage the perception of the service and the council.
Have you talked to people about that impact? (Y/N)		If yes detail, if no, why not?
Are there assumptions that you need to test? (Y/N)		Detail any assumptions and how you intend to test them.
What other issues or areas might benefit from stakeholder input?		Test the scope of what you are trying to achieve, what else may be appropriate to engage on.
Have you considered the communication implications of this work? Is it aligned with other messages that you are putting forward?		How does this fit within the overall narrative for the authority and communications priorities? Get advice and guidance from your communications team to ensure alignment.
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Planning for engagement

Key questions	Outcome	Things to think about and build in
What resource do you have and how will it be used?		Resource is your ultimate limiting factor, although, the more you build on existing relationships and reach out from that basis, the greater your resource. For example, good connections with Council Voluntary Services means leveraged reach.
What do you already know (from previous engagement, knowledge or experience)?		We are rarely starting from scratch. If you are putting together areas for investigation state assumptions and context to ensure the engagement is focused.
How will the engagement be communicated/publicised?		This needs to be aligned with other engagement and communication priorities. Speak to the communications team, who should have a 'master list' of ongoing campaigns and engagement projects.
What do you expect to get out of it and, importantly, what will participants get out of it?		Envisioning the exercise from both perspectives helps to ensure relevant design. Walk through it and scenario plan/play to understand how expectations will be developed and met.
What methods will be used?		Referring to good practice from within your organisation and from elsewhere, define methods that are appropriate for the audience and resource available.
Who will assess and monitor the response?		This is an important skill, if you are to make the most of engagement process then analysis of the findings needs to be as comprehensive as possible.
Who will analyse the results from the engagement?		Analysis is a skill in itself. Practical frameworks for analysis are available from organisations such as the LGA. Invest in understanding these and adapting them to your needs.
Who will act on the engagement? And in what ways?		Where will this output go, and how will it be adequately driven into the decision making and thought processes? (There is nothing worse than engaging and then ignoring what has been found out).

Who will the results be reported to and when?		What is the accountability for this piece of work?
How will you follow up and feedback to participants		Feedback is a critical part of the cycle, this is the opportunity to maintain links and foreshadow future involvement, manage expectations and reward and recognise people for what they have put in. Don't underestimate the value of this step in building trust.
Who will evaluate how successful the engagement has been and when?		Was it any good? Have a plan to evaluate internally and externally with participants. The more you can learn and absorb today the less work you need to do next time.
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Evaluation

Key questions	Outcome	Things to think about and build in
Did the exercise meet its objectives? (Y/N)		Did the exercise meaningfully contribute to the overall objectives of the authority? If so in what ways? If not how can this be done better in future?
Was the exercise fit for purpose in terms of scope and scale? (Y/N)		Have you used a sledgehammer to crack a nut? This is an important learning point for teams, scoping work of any sort is difficult and comes with experience. Teams need to articulate when they have over and underplayed it. A value for money element can be built in here.
Did the people involved understand and value the purpose of the engagement? (Y/N)		This is an objective question but entails a great deal of subjective thought. What you need to think about here is: did participants have the experience that they expected and that you intended?
What methods were used and did they provide the intended value?		There are many methods that can be used, but not all are appropriate all of the time. Building up an analysis of techniques used can produce insight into habits of the organisation and to assess new approaches.
Did the people receiving the output view it as relevant to their design/ decision/development? (Y/N)		Did it produce something that was not only relevant but useful in the development of the service?
How was feedback developed and was it adequately disseminated?		Tracking how and when you have fed back is part of assessing the process but also in creating records of engagement. This has the potential to contribute to CRM activities.
What new information has this exercise provided and how will it be shared with other teams?		Engaging when done at an organisational level is continually throwing up texture of people's understanding and perception of what the authority does. Capturing that and reporting it can surface potential issues and trends early.
Head of Service sign off		