

Meeting:	Cabinet
Date:	15 December 2005
Subject:	Draft Corporate Community Engagement Strategy
Responsible Officer:	Director of People, Performance and Policy
Contact Officer:	Bindu Arjoon
Portfolio Holder:	Communications, Partnership and Human Resources
Key Decision:	No
Status:	Part 1

## **Section 1: Summary**

### **Decision Required**

- i. Cabinet is requested to approve the council's Draft Community Engagement Strategy ('the Strategy')
- ii. Cabinet is requested to endorse the action plan for the implementation of the Strategy.
- iii. Refer the Strategy to the Harrow Strategic Partnership with a view to developing a joint community engagement strategy.

## Reason for report

- i. Feedback from elected members, external inspections, community and voluntary sector groups, residents and officers has identified that although in some areas, the council engages well with the local community, this needs to be replicated across the council. The Strategy aims to ensure that service areas involve the community in relevant decision making in a consistent and relevant way.
- ii. Analysis of a Quality of Life Survey commissioned by the Harrow Strategic Partnership and conducted by Mori in June of this year identified room for improvement in residents' perceptions of the council in terms of value for money and accessibility. The implementation of the Strategy should lead to residents feeling more informed about the work and performance of the council.
- iii. The Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of local authorities to which Harrow will be subject to next year will look for evidence of effective public engagement in the development and delivery of council services.

## Benefits

- i. The Strategy assists the council in meeting its corporate priorities of 'Valuing Customers' and 'Strengthening Harrow's Communities' by working with local residents to identify their needs.
- ii. The implementation of the strategy will facilitate a coordinated and standardised approach to community involvement across the council.
- iii. Better engagement with residents will lead to more appropriate service delivery as well as improvements in quality of life as more information is made available to residents to allow positive choices in areas such as public health, recycling and community cohesion and safety.

## Cost of Proposals

The costs of delivering the action plan associated with the Strategy will be met from existing budgets.

## Risks

There is a potential risk that the Strategy may not be adopted across the council. This has been mitigated by ensuring that an officer has the corporate responsibility for working across the council supporting service areas in implementing the standards within the Strategy.

## Implications if recommendations rejected

- i. A loss of credibility with the Harrow public
- ii. Failure to standardise and co-ordinate community engagement across the council
- iii. Failure to meet CPA requirements

## Section 2: Report

### 2.1 Brief History

The Strategy was developed after an initial document was produced titled, 'Harrow Council: Towards a Community Engagement Strategy'. The document suggested various ways in which the council could approach the development of a Community Engagement Strategy. The document was shared with portfolio holders, elected members on the Scrutiny Review of Community Engagement, officers across the council nominated by the Executive Directors, Harrow Association for Voluntary Service, the Community Cohesion and Older Person's Reference Groups of the Harrow Strategic Partnership (HSP) and the Voluntary & Community Sector Forum of the HSP.

The HSP commissioned a Quality of Life survey in June 2005:

- 9,000 were picked at random with 2,601 replying to the questionnaire.
- 46% of residents believe that the council keeps residents' very or fairly well informed
- 35% would like to have more say in what the council does and the services it provides
- 32% of residents strongly agree that the council is too remote and impersonal.

In order to address the outcomes of the quality of life survey we will measure consultation processes by identifying key performance indicators. We will also repeat the Quality of Life survey regularly to measure progress on these issues.

The Strategy highlights some key issues which need to be addressed in order to achieve a improved process for involving the community:

- Development of a database that will record consultation activity across the council as well as the results. This will ensure that we do not ask for the same or similar information in our various consultations. This database will be available on the intranet.
- Development of a toolkit identifying a portfolio of techniques for effective community involvement, learning from past exercises such as the Open Budget Process.
- Building expertise through a link officers' group, comprising representation from each directorate, to share good practice, and coordinate the database of consultation. This will be quality assured by quarterly reports to the Strategy & Programme Board.
- Capacity building to provide community engagement training for the community, voluntary sector, councillors and officers.

## 2.2 Options considered

Retaining the status quo, whereby no corporate standards are set for community involvement. This option was discounted as members, officers and the voluntary and community sector indicated that the status quo did not lead to the effectiveness of community engagement to which the Council aspired.

## 2.3 Consultation

The council's Corporate Management Team, Portfolio Holders, and the Scrutiny Review group of Community Engagement have considered a draft copy of the Strategy. Following feedback from these groups; the Strategy was sent to the Plain English Campaign to ensure that it is accessible to all.

More public consultation has taken place by using a range of methods:

- The development of a 'Harrow Speaks' questionnaire to elicit public opinion about the way in which they would like to be involved in the delivery of relevant services and securing their commitment to working with the council on future consultation exercises.
- Displays at various events; Black History Month 2005, Mangers' Conference in September, HSP Summit, Area Services launches at Rayner's Lane, Pinner and Hatch End
- Harrow Council Website

## **Outcomes of Consultation**

Residents who responded to both the discussion document and the Harrow Speaks leaflets indicated that they strongly supported the council was developing a co-ordinated approach and a high proportion indicated that they would like to be involved in future consultation. Officers within the council whilst expressing support for the Strategy have emphasised the need to ensure that strategies that are targeted to specific section of the community, for example, young people, are also used as indicators of good practice.

Pending approval by Cabinet, the Strategy will be launched before the end of this financial year. However, the Strategy will be reviewed annually to ensure that it is meetings its aims as well as allowing the incorporation of learning from the Scrutiny Review of Community Engagement in Harrow.

The next stage is to engage the Harrow Strategic Partnership to sign up to a strategy for engaging with Harrow residents.

### 2.4 Financial Implications

The costs of delivering the action plan associated with this Strategy will be met from existing budgets.

### 2.5 Legal Implications

Consultation is a key part of the portfolio to achieve/improve community engagement. There are established common law principles to ensure that consultation is legally effective. Those common law principles include ensuring that those consulted are able to understand the nature and context of any proposals they are being asked to consider. Consultees should understand how long they have to respond to the consultation, this should be a reasonable amount of time. In addition, people should understand who they can respond to/make representations and when a decision regarding the proposal might be reached.

### 2.6 Equalities Impact

The Strategy highlights the need for the council to work pro-actively with all communities, including making particularly efforts to work through existing networks in the community to identify those groups who do not typically communicate with the council.

### 2.7 Section 17 Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Considerations

Not relevant to this report

### **Section 3: Supporting Information/ Background Documents**

Draft Corporate Community Engagement Strategy - Harrow Speaks ' involving the community'. (Circulated in the Cabinet Supporting Documents Pack)

#### **Background Papers**

Available from the Policy & Partnership Service on 020 8424 1393 or via email to [hsp@harrow.gov.uk](mailto:hsp@harrow.gov.uk)

- i. HSP Quality of Life Survey, June 2005
- ii. Discussion Document- "Harrow Council: Towards A Community Engagement Strategy".
- iii. Consultation Leaflet: Harrow Speaks