

## #NewConversations: Engaging effectively with communities

### Purpose

For discussion and direction.

### Summary

This report advises members about the development and launch of a resource to assist councils to engage and consult effectively with their communities, in the context of challenging decisions and reducing resources.

### Recommendations

That the Improvement and Innovation Board;

1. **Note** progress in developing a best practice resource for councils on engagement and consultation.
2. **Advise** on any further ways in which it can be promoted and further learning captured and shared.

### Action

Officers to progress in the light of member's guidance.

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## **#NewConversations: Engaging effectively with communities**

### **Background**

1. The LGA has recently collated a range of information ([local.gov.uk/transformation](http://local.gov.uk/transformation)) which aims to support councils transforming their services to meet the financial challenge, and to better address the needs of their communities. As part of this work, it was recognised that there was a lack of guidance for councils on how to effectively engage with communities in achieving transformation and addressing the difficult decisions facing local government today.
2. The LGA commissioned The Campaign Company to develop a resource to help councils implement best practice in consultation and engagement with their communities. The Campaign Company are official partners of the Constitution Institute and have significant experience of working with a wide range of local authorities (officers and members) to build capability in consultation and engagement.
3. A well-attended workshop at the LGA Conference in July 2016, chaired by Cllr Judi Billing, heard how four councils (Oldham/Greater Manchester, Hackney, Staffordshire and Harlow) are, as part of this programme, piloting work designed to increase their skills and capacity in engaging with their local communities in the context of significant change and challenge. Participants in the workshop were keen to be kept informed about the development of the resource.

### **A new 'best practice' guide**

4. Since the workshop in July, The Campaign Company has been working on a detailed resource, to be published as an interactive pdf on the LGA's website. It will include:
  - 4.1. Guidance on 'getting the basics right':
    - 4.1.1. How to know when to consult, and when to opt for more open engagement techniques
    - 4.1.2. How to identify the most appropriate channels for consultation and engagement
    - 4.1.3. Relevant legislation and how to ensure compliance
    - 4.1.4. Avoiding 'own goals'
    - 4.1.5. Good practice
    - 4.1.6. Evaluating consultation and engagement

- 4.2. How to 'surpass expectations' - building trust in:
  - 4.2.1. Democracy - advice on involving people in decisions and creating mutual understanding
  - 4.2.2. Communities - building community capacity
  - 4.2.3. The 'system' – using digitisation and personalisation so people can easily engage with their councils
- 4.3. Narratives from the four pilot councils, describing their experiences and learning to date.
5. The work with the four pilot councils has enabled a number of different contexts, challenges and approaches to be considered:
  - 5.1. In **Oldham/ Greater Manchester**, the councils have been supported to refresh their approach to engagement and consultation. A resource pack has been developed for members to assist them in engaging with residents and communicating the core messages about devolution for Greater Manchester.
  - 5.2. In **Staffordshire**, the county recognised the challenge of maintaining 'customer trust' at a time of difficult financial decisions, and in a two-tier context. The council has reviewed existing community networks, considered their potential to support community engagement, identified people capable of providing insight into local issues and concerns, and utilised digital channels to reach online audiences. The aim is to support communities to develop their own capacity for informed local decisions and service improvement.
  - 5.3. In **Hackney**, the council has developed its strategic approach to engagement, and particularly with hard-to-reach communities, building on their success in engaging creatively across the borough on plans for 'A Place for Everyone'. Similar techniques are currently being employed in engagement around the types of schools that residents want in the borough and how this relates to their sense of place. Much of this is being done through deliberative events, with attendance recruited through the council's 'e-panel', which itself uses quota recruitment to ensure a range of participants representative of the borough as a whole. At the events, Cabinet Members and officers facilitate discussions to directly capture residents' views, and to ensure that decisions are shaped through discussion.
  - 5.4. In **Harlow**, while retaining a sense of community, the district faces a number of challenges due to declining finances, council capacity and resident satisfaction levels. Through more effective knowledge sharing across the organisation and partnership working, the council is aiming to achieve a more strategic and effective approach to engagement, and has tested this out through its recent customer service review. It is now intended to share this learning across the rest of the council.

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6. The guide argues that through good dialogue with residents, members and council staff can make their organisations more efficient, their communities happier and their whole lives easier – and build mutual trust between council and community.
7. The guide will be launched at an event at the LGA on 27 February, again chaired by Cllr Billing. The event will include presentations from the four pilot councils.
8. The event will be backed up by a wider promotional campaign to make councils aware of the resource, including a feature in First magazine. Opportunities will be created to enable more councils to share their own good practice and to continue to develop learning over time.
9. Members' advice is sought on any further ways good practice in this area can be promoted, shared and developed.

### **Implications for Wales**

10. The funding for the creation of this resource comes from DCLG funding for English Authorities and so only English authorities were considered as potential pilot councils. The best practice resource will be generally available via the LGA's website.

### **Financial implications**

11. The cost of the development of the resource and of the launch event is being met from the DCLG grant.

### **Next steps**

12. Officers to progress planning for the launch event and associated publicity, informed by members' guidance in response to paragraph 9 above.