

Part A

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: Monday, 30 October 2023

Report author: Strategic Initiatives Officer

Title: Community Engagement and Participation Strategy

1.0 Summary

1.1 Watford Borough Council has undertaken a cross cutting review to establish a more strategic approach to community engagement and participation.

1.2 The aspirations of the review included to:

- join together and strengthen activity already taking place, building upon the town's diverse, vibrant and engaged voluntary sector
- harness the insights and energy of the Watford community, establishing a collaborative and productive relationship that serves our residents
- improve the way in which we conduct engagement, supporting the community to shape decisions and ensuring all voices are heard equally
- explore an Asset Based Community Development approach, with the council as an enabler for communities to support themselves and one another, and for community development to flourish

1.3 Following Cabinet approval in July to commence consultation activity and provide an opportunity for Watford's Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to test the strategy and shape the final version, this report provides a summary of the consultation activity and feedback received and presents the final strategy.

2.0 Risks

2.1

Nature of risk	Consequence	Suggested Control Measures	Response (treat, tolerate, terminate or transfer)	Risk Rating (combination of severity and likelihood)
The Council does not adopt a more strategic approach to its community engagement	Parts of the community are not heard and fail to access support and resources	Develop a strategic approach to ensure new, emergent and unseen communities are all engaged	Treat	4

Watford's voluntary and community sector do not feel able to shape the strategy and do not recognise their own experiences in the strategy	The strategy does not lead to the step change in the council's engagement and participation with the community and VCS	A programme of consultation	Treat	6
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3.0 Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet reviews the feedback, learnings and outcomes of the consultation activity undertaken within development of this strategy.
- 3.2 That Cabinet reviews and adopts the Community Engagement and Participation Strategy 2023-2027.

Further information:

Natalie Frost
natalie.frost@watford.gov.uk

Report approved by: Kathryn Robson, Director of Performance

4.0 Detailed proposal

Background to the strategy

- 4.1 In line with the ambition in our Council Plan to focus on engaging and listening to our community, the new Community Engagement and Participation Strategy aims to deliver upon our commitment 'to listen to, and hear, the diverse voices of Watford'.
- 4.2 A strategic review of the council's community engagement activities has been undertaken, in order to understand and evaluate the key touchpoints with the community across the whole organisation. Within this, the council's relationship with the voluntary sector and role in community development has also been examined, in order to enable a strategy that establishes a collaborative relationship that is inclusive of, and beneficial to, all.

Aims and objectives

- 4.3 The strategy seeks to develop a consistent and forward looking strategic approach and set out how we will proactively work with and engage with our community, and

voluntary and community sector. Celebrating the contribution of our community and recognising the invaluable role they continue to play through each of the recent crises including the Covid-19 pandemic and current cost of living crisis, it sets out how the council can support a strong and resilient community, where people's voices are heard and individuals, groups and organisations feel valued and inspired by our town.

- 4.4 Starting with the commitments set out in our Council Plan 2022-26 and associated Delivery Plan, the strategy will act as a golden thread running through our key strategies and into delivery. It will connect our commitment to work alongside our community to find the right ways to reach net carbon zero with our Environmental Strategy and how we seek to engage with people to understand their barriers, what is important to them, and what opportunities we have to facilitate change. It supports our dialogue as we review the Voluntary Sector Commissioning Framework, our strategy for community assets, our Communications and Conversations Strategy and our Customer Experience Strategy to help us deliver upon our commitments to celebrate and promote our town's rich and diverse culture and creativity, to support improved health and wellbeing across the town, and to listen to and hear the diverse voices of Watford.
- 4.5 The strategy recognises there is great potential to join together and strengthen the activity already taking place, recognising our communities as contributors and establishing a long term, collaborative relationship that is inclusive of all and allows all to flourish. At the same time, we want to enable new and emergent communities to access support and resources and build for themselves a fulfilling and thriving role within the life of Watford. This opportunity to connect the layers of help and support already so well established in Watford under a unifying vision and clear outcomes, underpins this strategy and approach.
- 4.6 We have taken a strategic review of how we as a council engage with the community, the challenges and opportunities within this activity, and worked to define our emerging vision for engagement and participation. We have outlined four key themes, accompanied by a delivery plan which sets out how we can implement this vision.

Consultation

- 4.7 The Community Engagement and Participation Strategy has been developed in alignment with, and shaped by, our understanding of the priorities and needs of the local VCS.
- 4.8 In order to develop the strategy, a comprehensive exercise was undertaken to understand and evaluate the key touchpoints with the community across the council, investigating the ways in which the organisation carries out a wide variety and range of engagement with the community. Within this, the council's

relationship with the voluntary sector and role in community development was examined. A social consultancy was engaged to offer insight and advice on best practice and to support the review by undertaking a period of listening and discovery, hearing from a range of people individually and in groups, including the Elected Mayor, Deputy Mayor and Portfolio Holder for Community, other Cabinet Members and senior officers. Within this research, day to day feedback provided by organisations to service areas across the council was heard. A variety of approaches by other local authorities and recommendations from bodies such as the LGA were also reviewed.

- 4.9 Consultation on the draft Community Engagement and Participation Strategy took place during June-August 2023 and was open to the VCS across the borough. This included:
- an initial stage of detailed pre-engagement with partner organisations
 - consultation involving an interactive presentation and discussion session
 - an online survey that was open for a six week period.
- 4.10 49 organisations participated in the consultation, representing charities, not for profits, sports clubs, community interest companies delivering across a wide range of areas in the borough. A full list of participating organisations is detailed in the feedback report appended to this paper.
- 4.11 The consultation found a very positive response to the strategy, with participants responding that the emerging strategy set out an excellent vision and ambition, clearly aligned with their own objectives, conveying appropriate ambition and resonating with feedback that they had raised particularly around making connections within the VCS in Watford.
- 4.12 Participants provided detailed feedback on the strengths and challenges of Watford's VCS. There was a consensus that Watford has a very positive and active local VCS, delivering a huge amount for Watford's community with a strength and culture to be proud of.
- 4.13 Particular strengths included the collaboration and support organisations provide to one another, the exemplary relationships between the VCS and council underpinned by the vital role of councillors in engaging at the local and neighbourhood level, and the value of existing initiatives such as the council convened Cost of Living Forums and the CVS' Volunteer Fair.
- 4.14 The key challenges were set out to be accessing funding and recruiting volunteers, juggling resource constraints with making and building upon collaborative connections, and the issue of seeking premises whilst balancing the cost of rent or leases.

- 4.15 Participants encouraged the council to continue to facilitate and coordinate, helping the VCS to share resources, skill sets and focus on issues together. Suggestions for new ways to expand upon this included a source of signposting to understand the other organisations delivering across an area or needs, for example when trying to help a family in crisis, providing packs of information such as the Census data to support funding applications, showcasing the great initiatives happening across the VCS, and continuing to seek new ways to amplify the voices of those less often heard.
- 4.16 The Community Network Event, a deliverable of this strategy, was welcomed by participants and encouraged as a means of collaborating, networking, sharing news and inputting into the council's strategic workstreams.
- 4.17 Direct feedback on the strategy included:
- 1) To broaden the focus to include more on the socio-economic context, underlining the value of investing in residents via the VCS so that they stay and become economic drivers in Watford;
 - 2) To strengthen focus on collaboration and creating opportunities to network/collaborate with diverse range of conversation;
 - 3) Revisions to the vision statement to reflect a goal of enabling the VCS to influence decisions that make maximum impact for residents, extending their impact rather than things that impact them as organisations.
- 4.18 The feedback received has helped us to shape the final strategy, ensuring that feedback is reflected in its aims and translates through into the themes and actions. It has helped us to ensure that we fully understand the challenges, opportunities and strengths of the VCS and correctly reflect these in the strategy. The clear alignment found during consultation underlined that we are taking the right steps in this approach, and we will continue to ensure that we hear and take action upon feedback raised.
- 4.19 The strategy is accompanied by a detailed delivery plan that sets out responsibilities for each recommendation and strategic oversight of the strategy will be held by the Director of Performance, with the delivery plan monitored as part of the council's quarterly performance reporting. The delivery plan will be monitored by reporting into the EPMO, in line with internal EPMO processes on strategy progress reporting.

5.0 **Implications**

5.1 **Financial**

- 5.1.1 The Shared Director of Finance comments that there are no financial implications within this report, noting that actions in the delivery plan will be met from existing budgets.

5.2 **Legal Issues** (Monitoring Officer)

5.2.1 The Group Head of Democracy and Governance comments that there are no legal implications within this report.

5.3 **Equalities, Human Rights and Data Protection**

5.3.1 As this is a new strategy, an equalities impact analysis has been undertaken. The analysis is attached as Appendix 5 to this report. The main conclusions of the analysis are that the potential positive impacts of the strategy will deliver benefit not only to the community, who will be better enabled to deliver their vital work, access support and resources and collaborate with one another and the council, and directly to residents, who will benefit from the strengthened outputs of these organisations.

5.3.2 There are no human rights implications under this report.

5.3.3 Having had regard to the council's obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018, it is considered that officers are not required to undertake a Data Processing Impact Assessment (DPIA) for this report.

5.4 **Staffing**

5.4.1 Resourcing of the strategy has been carefully considered and ownership of individual components has been set out in the accompanying delivery plan.

5.5 **Accommodation**

5.5.1 There are no implications in this section. There is a recommendation to review the approach to community assets and this approach will be assessed under the emerging Community Asset Strategy.

5.6 **Community Safety/Crime and Disorder**

5.6.1 There are no implications in this report.

5.7 **Sustainability**

5.7.1 There are no sustainability implications within this report.

Appendices

This report is accompanied by:

- Appendix 1 – Community Engagement and Participation Strategy
- Appendix 2 – Delivery Plan
- Appendix 3 – Our layers of support for thriving communities
- Appendix 4 – Levels of engagement
- Appendix 5 – Equalities Impact Assessment
- Appendix 6 – Feedback report

Background papers

No papers were used in the preparation of this report.