

A NEW APPROACH TO ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION (DRAFT)

Appendix One



Introduction

Plymouth City Council's [Community Empowerment Programme](#), adopted in 2021, set out a bold and progressive vision for Plymouth City Council

“To enable communities to take greater control over their lives by supporting them to do things for themselves, influence decisions, and shape the services and places that matter to them.”

This vision has been brought to life through a range of initiatives that have made a tangible difference—improving access to information, community building, supporting volunteering, enabling community ownership, and promoting inclusive growth in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. (See case studies below)

The Community Empowerment Programme recognises that engagement is a vital strand on the journey toward full empowerment.

Alongside this, the Council's Consultation and Engagement Framework, established in 2014, provided a foundation for how we involve residents, partners, and stakeholders in shaping services and decisions. However, the world has moved on significantly since this was developed. Advances in technology, shifts in public expectations, and new ways of working have transformed how people interact with public services and participate in civic life.

While there are pockets of excellence across the organisation—where services are already working in empowering and innovative ways—this is not consistent across the Council.

This paper focuses specifically on engagement and consultation as a critical step toward realising the broader goal of community empowerment. It does not attempt to address the full scope of the Empowerment Programme, but instead aims to strengthen the foundations upon which empowerment can grow. While engagement is a vital part of decision-making, it is important to recognise that not every decision will involve consultation or engagement. Where engagement activity does take place, it will inform the decision-making process, but final decisions will also be shaped by other factors such as financial constraints, legal obligations, and property ownership.

This following approach is grounded in best practice and informed by the principles of [Human Learning Systems](#) - an approach that recognises the complexity of public service delivery and the need to work relationally, strength-based, adaptively, and reflectively. It encourages learning and collaborating with communities, rather than 'doing to', and aligns closely with our ambition to move from transactional engagement to genuine empowerment. At its heart, this is also about the Council

being curious—actively seeking to understand what matters to people, how they experience services and places, and what ideas they have for change.

The case for change

The original engagement and consultation framework developed over a decade ago, was ambitious in its vision. It aimed to create a culture of listening and responsiveness, where residents had a clear voice in shaping local services and decisions.

However, due to a combination of reduced capacity, shifting priorities, and limited resources, many of the commitments outlined in the 2014 strategy were never fully enacted. As a result, engagement, particularly around decision making, has often been inconsistent across the council, with varying levels of quality, transparency, and follow-through.

Digital technology has transformed how people communicate, access information, and participate in civic life. Social media, online platforms, and mobile apps have opened new channels for dialogue, but they have also raised expectations for immediacy, responsiveness, and inclusion.

At the same time, public trust in institutions has become more fragile, and communities are increasingly demanding a more meaningful role in shaping the decisions that affect their lives.

- Our **Corporate Plan** adopted in 2023 reflects this shift. It commits us to:
- Listening more actively
 - Engaging more meaningfully
 - Trusting our communities to be partners in decision-making.

This commitment must now be translated into a new framework that is fit for purpose—one that reflects the values of empowerment, inclusivity, and shared responsibility.

It is important to note that this framework complements and builds upon the Council’s adopted **Statement of Community Involvement (SCI)** (or it’s replacement under the Levelling Up Act), which sets out statutory requirements for consultation in planning matters. While the SCI remains the definitive guide for planning-related engagement, this framework provides a broader, organisation-wide approach to engagement and consultation. It ensures consistency, transparency, and inclusivity across all service areas, while respecting the legal obligations and specialist processes outlined in the SCI.

Examples of good practice in our engagement and consultation work

Across Plymouth City Council, there are pockets of excellent consultation and engagement practice. These examples demonstrate how different teams are working creatively and collaboratively with communities to shape services and policies. Our new framework has been developed alongside the Council’s Community Empowerment Board and Engagement Community of Practice to ensure that we are

learning from those areas, considering best practice and looking at how we can complement the work that they are already doing.

Strategic Commissioning

We coproduced the [Plymouth All-Age Unpaid Carers Strategy](#) and a [Co-Production Commissioning Toolkit](#) including resources and examples of Appreciative Inquiry and co-design. We developed an engagement calendar to coordinate activity and reduce duplication for the Carers Strategy. Coproduction training delivered to strategic commissioners co-delivered with Changing Futures staff. Following training commissioning staff were invited to attend a community of practice 'Coproduction Circle' where they can develop their skills and test out new ideas alongside people with relevant lived and learned experience.

SEND Service

Our SEND Service takes a [structured and inclusive approach to co-production](#), embedding it throughout the year via a planned calendar of engagement activities. These include workshops, consultations, and feedback sessions designed in partnership with Parent Carer Forums and young people.

Young people from the SEND Participation Group play an active role in shaping services—from contributing to project briefs to influencing full-scale service redesigns. Their involvement is not tokenistic; they hold a seat at the SEND Improvement Board, where their lived experience directly informs strategic decision-making. This approach ensures that services are not only shaped by professional expertise but also by the voices of those who use them. It reflects a commitment to shared power, transparency, and continuous learning—hallmarks of meaningful co-production.

Strategic Planning and Infrastructure

We combine creative engagement methods—like a citywide “sofa tour”—with formal consultation to support the Local Plan and Plymouth Plan, balancing innovation with statutory requirements and utilising digital tools.

Public Health

We use Appreciative Inquiry and asset-based approaches to build relationships with communities and understand lived experience, gathering insight with the city's team of Community Builders, who facilitate community-led initiatives. We have trained 90 citywide professionals in Asset Based Community Development and meet regularly as a network to share best practice and learning.

Plymouth Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC)

The HDRC embeds research expertise within Plymouth City Council to support evidence-based service design. Working with communities and researchers, the programme focuses on the wider determinants of health—like housing, education, and employment. Through co-produced research and lived experience insight, HDRC helps ensure decisions are grounded in real-world needs and data, strengthening inclusive and responsive service delivery.

Natural Environment Team

Through our projects and programmes such as Green Minds and the Plymouth Sound National Marine Park, have built strong partnerships with environmental groups, transforming relationships through practical volunteering and co-designed delivery through Asset Based Community Development and Appreciative Inquiry.

Changing Futures Plymouth

Working with people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage we have co-produced toolkits, training, and policies. Engagement is rooted in trauma-informed practice and peer research.

Net Zero Delivery Team

We have engaged with communities through events like Climate Mingle and interactive tools such as online mapping for EV charging point suggestions. Focusing all our work on co-designing innovative, community-led climate solutions. The team also facilitate Plymouth Climate Ambassadors with the Participation Team to ensure young people's voices are heard within the city's net zero action plan

Youth Services

Our Youth Participation Team worked with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to understand their experiences upon arriving in Plymouth and the support they received. Young people helped create an animation, *Listening to the Voices of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Young People*, sharing their stories. This led to the formation of a dedicated team to address the challenges they faced. In a recent focused visit, Ofsted praised the team's culturally sensitive approach and ability to build trusting relationships, noting that young people are placed in accommodation that meets their needs and receive consistently high-quality support regardless of location.

Safeguarding Children's Partnership

Young people across Plymouth, supported by the Participation Team and Young Safeguarders, developed the *Ten Wishes – What Children and Young People Want from Professionals*. They created a film and booklet to share these wishes with the local workforce. A Ten Wishes Charter was launched, with key agencies – including the Council, Livewell, Devon and Cornwall Police, NSPCC and schools, signing up. This reflects a city-wide commitment to listening to young people and embedding their wishes into training, policies, procedures, and quality assurance across organisations.

There are many more examples, and we aim to build on them to continue raising the standard of engagement and consultation across the organisation.

External expectations for change

The **Civil Society Covenant Framework**, launched by the UK Government in July 2025, is an important backdrop to this. The Covenant sets out shared principles—recognition, partnership, participation, and transparency—that define how public bodies and civil society should work together. It reinforces the importance of inclusive, respectful, and collaborative relationships with communities, aligning closely with our own ambitions for community empowerment. By

embedding these principles locally, we can strengthen trust, support more meaningful participation, and ensure our engagement practices reflect national expectations for a more open and responsive public sector.

Whilst there are pockets of excellence within the organisation, over the past year, several developments have underscored the need for a more coherent and strategic approach.

The [Independent Learning Review of the Armada Way](#) consultation process highlighted critical shortcomings, including:

- a lack of early engagement
- unclear communication of purpose
- insufficient feedback mechanisms.

These findings point to a broader issue: the absence of a shared organisational standard for what good engagement looks like.

The review panel recommended that the Council needed to:

- Introduce corporate standards for consultation and engagement that set out how engaging with and listening to residents will be put into practice.
- Introduce a protocol for officers and members, with associated training.

In parallel, the Government's expectations under **Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)** have placed a renewed emphasis on local accountability, resident involvement, and transparent decision-making. And recent legislation, such as the **English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill**, aims to move decision-making closer to residents, thereby empowering communities to shape their futures. This includes the introduction of effective neighbourhood governance structures to amplify local voices and giving more power to local communities to purchase assets of community value and making reforms to commercial leases.

While Plymouth City Council's proposals are still under development, it is clear that there is an expectation that councils need to fundamentally reshape their relationship with communities, embedding local voices more deeply in how services are shaped and delivered. This will signal a shift toward a more open, collaborative way of working—one that aligns with our broader ambition to place empowerment at the heart of everything we do.

Whilst this could be the longer-term direction of travel, it is important to get the basics around engagement right. We must ensure that residents are not only informed but actively involved in shaping the future of the city. Building trust, clarity, and consistency in how we engage and consult today will lay the foundation for stronger, more empowered communities tomorrow.

Indeed, these expectations align closely with our own organisational effectiveness journey, where empowerment has been identified as a key driver for change.

“We want to design services that better meet the needs of our customers and we will do this by listening, learning and co-creating with our communities.”

Empowerment v Engagement v Consultation: clarifying the distinction
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To build an effective engagement and consultation framework, it is essential to distinguish the differences and linkages between empowerment, engagement and consultation. The ultimate goal of engagement is ‘empowerment’.

To empower you must engage, but engagement alone is not empowerment.

- **Empowerment** is the process of enabling individuals and communities to have the authority, resources, and confidence to influence or lead on making decisions that affect their lives. It goes beyond engagement by moving the power away from institutions to people, allowing communities to take ownership of solutions, lead initiatives, and shape outcomes. Empowerment is about shared decision-making, capacity building, and long-term influence.
Example: Asset based community development e.g. Carrying out a parking ballot for a new Controlled Parking Zone, where at least 51% of households in an area must vote in favour of the proposal.
- **Engagement** is the ongoing process of building relationships and involving people in shaping decisions, policies, and services. It includes a spectrum of activities—from informing and listening to collaborating and co-producing. Engagement is about dialogue, mutual understanding, and working together to improve outcomes. However, it is important to note that the Council still retains the ‘power’, rather than communities.
Example: Working with residents and stakeholders on developing proposals for the Manadon improvement scheme through workshops, interviews, drop in sessions and consultation.
- **Consultation** is a more structured and time-limited process where an organisation seeks feedback on a specific proposal or decision before it is finalised. It typically involves asking for views, analysing responses, and reporting back on how those views influenced the outcome. Consultation is about gathering input, not sharing power.
Example: The annual budget consultation carried out by the Council.

It is important to recognise [Arnstein's Ladder of Participation](#), which illustrates the varying degrees of public involvement in decision-making, from non-participation, through informing, consultation, engagement and up to empowerment, where citizens hold the control.



In the context of this piece of work, it is important that there is a shared definition of the word ‘Community’. Community can mean different things, but in the context of engagement, it refers to groups of people connected by a shared interest, identity, or location. People often belong to multiple communities, each with its own needs and perspectives. Broadly, communities fall into three types:

- **Communities of place** – linked by geography, such as a neighbourhood or park.
- **Communities of identity** – connected by shared characteristics or experiences, like age, disability, or faith.
- **Communities of interest** – united by a common concern or passion, such as environmental groups or hobby clubs.

Benefits of a new framework

Our new approach to engagement and consultation must seek to get the basics right, whilst have an overarching commitment to work towards genuine empowerment.

This new framework will ensure that:

- Residents understand what to expect when they are asked to participate and engage with the Council.
- The Council has a clear and accurate understanding of community views
- Council decisions are informed by the lived experiences and insights of local people.
- There is an improved sharing of data and insight across the Council
- The Council engages effectively with all relevant stakeholders when making decisions

Such a framework will not only improve the quality of decision-making but also strengthen community bonds, increase transparency, and build trust. It will help us

deliver better services, reduce conflict, and create a more resilient and responsive local authority.

Best practice for an engagement and consultation framework

To modernise our approach and deliver on the Engagement strand in our Community Empowerment Strategy and potential changes from Local Government Reorganisation, we are drawing on national best practice—particularly the **Local Government Association's New Conversations 2.0 framework**

This framework emphasises that engagement is not a one-off event, but an ongoing relationship built on trust, clarity, and mutual respect. It outlines key principles such as early planning, transparency, and legal compliance, and highlights the importance of embedding engagement across the organisation—not just within specialist teams.

What are the pillars of effective engagement?

The Local Government Association (LGA) identifies several core pillars that underpin high-quality engagement:

- **Clarity:** Being transparent about what is being decided, what input is being sought, and how it will be used.
- **Leadership:** Recognising the role of councillors as connectors between the council and the community.
- **Culture:** Embedding engagement across all services, supported by leadership and reflected in organisational systems.
- **Co-production:** Working alongside communities to design services and solutions together.
- **Decision-making:** Ensuring engagement is linked to real decisions, such as budgets, policies, and service design.
- **Inclusion:** Reaching underrepresented groups through trusted messengers and community networks.
- **Place-based working:** Tailoring engagement to the unique needs and identities of different neighbourhoods.
- **Capacity-building:** Supporting residents to participate meaningfully by building skills, confidence, and access to information.

By adopting the principles of *New Conversations*, we can ensure that our engagement is not only more effective but also more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable. It will help us build a culture where residents are not just heard but genuinely involved in shaping the future of their communities. We have used this guidance as a practical roadmap for implementation - one that aligns closely with our proposed charter, toolkit, and training programme (see below).

Framework for engagement and consultation

The below framework has been designed so that it aligns with existing examples of best practice across the Council. For example, the SEND Service demonstrates structured, inclusive co-production through a year-round calendar of engagement, with young people actively contributing to service design and decision-making via the SEND Improvement

Board. Similarly, the Changing Futures programme works with people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage to co-design services, embedding trauma-informed, peer-led approaches across commissioning and delivery. Together, these initiatives (and others referenced above) reflect a culture where collaboration is embedded in service delivery - not treated as an add-on.

OUR NEW FRAMEWORK FOR ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION

Engagement and consultation won't always look the same and they shouldn't. Our approach will be flexible but principled, shaped by the scale, impact, and complexity of the issue. Some matters will need deep collaboration with communities; others may require focused consultation or clear communication. What matters is that our approach is thoughtful, transparent, and aligned with our values and legal duties.

Some engagement is a legal requirement. For example, planning applications or budget proposals. These statutory processes are set out in the Council's Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). This framework complements, but does not replace, those obligations.

Beyond legal duties, we will take a consistent, values-led approach. We'll consider public interest, potential impact, opportunities for influence, and the importance of trust. We'll be clear about what's open to change and what isn't. We will avoid overpromising and manage expectations honestly.

Engagement sits on a spectrum. From informing and consulting to collaborating and empowering. We'll clearly explain where each activity sits and why, ensuring our approach is proportionate, strategic, and meaningful.

OUR NEW PUBLIC COMMITMENT:

At the heart of this approach is a public-facing **Engagement and Consultation Charter** that sets out our values - respect, transparency, inclusion, responsiveness, and partnership. It outlines the behaviours we expect from staff and the commitments we make to residents and stakeholders. Rooted in the Gunning Principles, the Charter ensures our engagement is fair, timely, and meaningful. It will be brought to life through practical tools and support. (See appendix two).

A STRENGTHENED APPROACH TO LISTENING AND ENGAGING

The Council has a layered and coordinated approach to listening to residents and gathering insight into their views, experiences, and expectations. This includes structured surveys such as:

- The City Survey, which captures perceptions about the city, community, and personal wellbeing.
- The Council Residents Survey, which focuses on views about council services and performance.

These are statistically robust surveys that are designed collaboratively with internal teams and external partners. They are conducted regularly to inform strategic

planning, service improvement, and city promotion. However, they are subject to funding availability.

In addition to these corporate surveys, the Council undertakes a customer data audit to understand what feedback is already being collected across departments. This feeds into a customer feedback dashboard, which provides real-time intelligence on satisfaction, complaints, and service experiences.

Feedback is also gathered through digital platforms like Firmstep, which captures comments, compliments, and complaints, and can be configured to generate strategic insights such as heat maps and performance metrics.

Many individual services have also developed their own ways of engaging and listening to residents on a regular basis, with approaches tailored to their specific audiences and service areas. These local approaches provide valuable insight and complement the corporate mechanisms. See the case studies for more information on how services are embedding engagement in their day-to-day work.

Beyond these structured mechanisms, residents can also share their views through other democratic routes. These include submitting petitions, asking questions at Council or Cabinet meetings, or requesting that the Scrutiny function explore specific issues e.g. such as through a task and finish group. These channels provide important opportunities for residents to raise concerns, influence decisions, and contribute to the Council's work.

Other sources of insight include councillor casework, MP enquiries, social media monitoring, and feedback collected by external service providers. These diverse channels ensure that resident voices are heard at both strategic and operational levels, supporting shared decision-making and continuous improvement.

However, to strengthen this, moving forward we will launch:

A new rolling programme of engagement and listening across the city

Building on the success of the Big Community Conversation, we will deliver a rolling programme of engagement using both digital and face-to-face methods. This programme will be underpinned by the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, focusing on what's strong in our communities rather than what's wrong.

By creating spaces for positive, strengths-based dialogue, we aim to have deeper conversations with communities into specific themes and topics, enabling us to uncover local assets, celebrate community achievements, and co-create solutions.

This approach will help us reach a wide and diverse audience, with a particular focus on amplifying underrepresented voices and fostering inclusive participation. A further proposal outlining how this will work will be developed over the next few months. It will be led by the new Engagement and Consultation lead and will require organisational support in terms of delivery.

An improved public-facing online hub

At the moment there is no one place to find all consultation and engagement activities being undertaken by the Council, making it confusing to understand what opportunities there are to have your say. An improved online hub will showcase all live engagement and consultation opportunities and share outcomes and impacts, making the process more transparent and accessible.

NEW RESOURCES TO DRIVE GOOD PRACTICE ACROSS THE ORGANISATION

Engagement and Consultation Lead

To support delivery, a dedicated Engagement and Consultation Lead will be appointed. While engagement and consultation will remain the responsibility of individual services - who must also ensure compliance with any statutory requirements - this role will provide additional capacity and expertise. We will also explore the possibility of an apprenticeship programme to booster resource and skills across the organisation.

The officer will work alongside the Empowerment and Corporate Communications teams to oversee implementation of this framework, manage the online engagement hub and calendar, along with the Council's corporate consultation tool. They will also ensure staff are trained and supported. They will act as the organisation's central point of contact for advice and guidance, helping teams design inclusive and effective engagement strategies.

STRENGTHENED TRAINING AND SUPPORT

New engagement and consultation toolkit/staff guide

A new toolkit/staff guide will provide clear, practical guidance on when and how to engage, which tools to use, and how to ensure activity is inclusive and proportionate. It will help staff assess the right level of engagement, understand legal requirements, and apply best practice.

It will include templates, planning checklists, stakeholder mapping guidance, and feedback mechanisms. It will also offer advice on using digital tools, analysing responses (including ethical use of AI), and working across services to avoid duplication. As a living resource, it will evolve with case studies, lessons learned, and peer contributions. (See appendix 3)

Improved training and support package

A refreshed training offer will include an online learning hub, regular learning sessions, and peer support. This will ensure staff feel confident and equipped to deliver high-quality engagement and consultation. It will also be included as part of the new-starter induction process.

Our training offer will also introduce staff to the Human Learning Systems and using the principles of delivering engagement through a Trauma Informed approach, helping them to understand how learning, relationships, and context can shape more meaningful engagement. This will support a culture of reflection, curiosity, and continuous improvement across the organisation.

Refresh the Engagement Champions and Community of Practice

The Council already has an Engagement Community of Practice, where staff who are regularly involved in engagement work come together to share ideas, build confidence, and promote best practice. Training will include facilitation, managing difficult conversations, Appreciative Inquiry, and Asset-Based Community Development. However, the group have not been active for some time. Therefore, membership and purpose will be reviewed to revitalise and re-embed good practice across the organisation. Existing members of the group have also fed into the development of the toolkit/staff guide.

STRENGTHENED PLANNING AND PROCESSES

New Engagement and consultation calendar

A central internal calendar, managed by the Engagement and Consultation Lead, will coordinate activity across the organisation. It will help avoid duplication, identify opportunities for collaboration, and ensure residents are not overwhelmed by overlapping consultations.

Central repository of engagement feedback

To improve insight-sharing, we will develop an internal central repository for engagement feedback. This will allow departments to access relevant intelligence, build a more complete picture of community needs, and respond more effectively to cross-cutting issues.

MODERNISING THE TOOLS WE USE

A review of engagement and consultation tools

We will review the tools currently used across the organisation to ensure they are accessible, effective, and aligned with our principles. This includes reviewing the Council's commissioned survey platform and other digital and in-person tools, so staff are aware of what's available and can choose the right approach. See the appendix for further information on a number of these areas.

REPORTING TO UNDERSTAND WHAT PEOPLE THINK

New quarterly engagement report

To strengthen our understanding of public sentiment and improve transparency, the Council will introduce a quarterly engagement report. This report will be produced by the Engagement and Consultation Lead, with support from the Community of Practice, and will provide a regular summary of how we have engaged with residents, what we have heard, and what we have learned.

The report will draw together insights from across the organisation. This will include: corporate surveys, service-level engagement, digital platforms, councillor casework, and Community Conversations, to build a clearer picture of what people think about the Council, the work we are delivering, and the decisions we are making.

By publishing this report quarterly, we aim to:

- Improve visibility of engagement activity across the Council.
- Identify trends in public feedback and sentiment.
- Support learning and reflection across services.
- Inform decision-making and service improvement.
- Demonstrate accountability to residents.

The quarterly report will be shared internally to support strategic planning and performance management, and externally to promote transparency and build trust with our communities.

Conclusion

The need for a new approach to engagement and consultation is clear. Our current policy is outdated, some of our practices are inconsistent, and our communities are asking for more. By adopting a new framework with an ambition to work towards further community empowerment, transparency, and co-design, we can build a stronger, more responsive, and more trusted local authority. This is not just about better engagement—it is about better governance, better services, and better outcomes for everyone.

As we prepare for the changes brought by Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), this framework positions us to lead with confidence and clarity. It provides the foundation for a more community-driven model.

By embedding consistent standards, strengthening our culture of listening, and investing in the capacity of both staff and residents, we are laying the groundwork for a future where local voices are not only heard but are central to how decisions are made.

This is our opportunity to reset the relationship between the Council and the communities we serve. Through this framework, we commit to building a more open, inclusive, and collaborative local government—one that is ready for the future and rooted in the strengths of its people.