



Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2026 - 2028



Exeter
City Council

Purpose

We are dedicated to creating a city where decisions reflect the voices of our communities. Listening and involving residents is not just a principle, it's the foundation to help shape services, neighbourhood priorities, and citywide priorities. Meaningful consultation and engagement enable us to understand diverse needs, build trust, and co-design solutions that improve quality of life for everyone. By embedding inclusion, transparency, and collaboration into every stage of this strategy, we ensure that community insight drives better, more responsive services and lasting change.

The consultation and engagement strategy will guide how we listen, consult and involve people. This, together with our [Consultation Charter](#), will help ensure that our consultation and engagement is meaningful, effective, and accountable across the Council.

It's fundamental to us that we build trust and confidence in our systems and processes if we want more people and communities to get involved in our consultation and engagement activities. A first step to building trust and confidence is to help people understand why we are consulting them, what we are consulting on, and what they can expect from us. We believe that setting key principles for best practice in this strategy and being accountable for meeting them, we will be able to improve and deliver consistently good consultation and engagement activities.

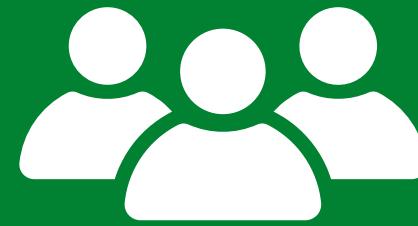
Aims

- Make our consultation and engagement processes meaningful, consistent and insightful.
- Strive to deliver inclusive consultation and engagement activities, enabling better access and participation so everyone an opportunity to contribute.
- Be open and transparent with consultation and engagement activities to help increase trust and confidence.
- Increase accountability through a consistent and continually improving use of our consultation and engagement processes.

Where there's a defined statutory and legal process for consultations, then those processes will be followed. However, these consultations will take into consideration the principles of the consultation and engagement strategy and the consultation charter.

Who

By taking part in meaningful consultation and engagement activities, we want **everyone** in Exeter to feel included, heard, and able to shape the future of our city. For us, **everyone** means:



Service users



Exeter residents



Business



People who visit Exeter



People who work in Exeter



Public sector
(e.g. local/national
government & agencies)



Voluntary, community &
social enterprise
organisations (VCSEs)

What we mean by consultation and engagement

For this strategy, it's useful to distinguish what we mean by both consultation and engagement. Consultation is just one form of engagement but is typically focused on decisions or changes which the council is proposing or considering. [Local Government Association](#) states: "Consultation is technically any activity that gives local people a voice and an opportunity to influence important decisions. It involves listening to and learning from local people before decisions are made or priorities are set."

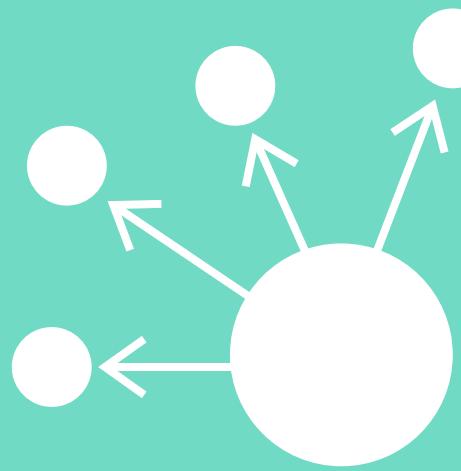
By contrast, engagement does not start and end when there are decisions or changes being considered. Engagement is an ongoing process which helps the council to continuously learn from communities, share information and ideas, and build deep and meaningful relationships with stakeholders.

Levels of community involvement will vary depending on the nature of each consultation or engagement activity and what it is aiming to achieve. For example, some activities will be hyper-local, while others will be city-wide, which may lead to differing levels of involvement and different methods of data/ information collection.

To help explain the potential for different levels of involvement, public bodies developed the 'ladder of public engagement' concept which we have adapted and presented below.

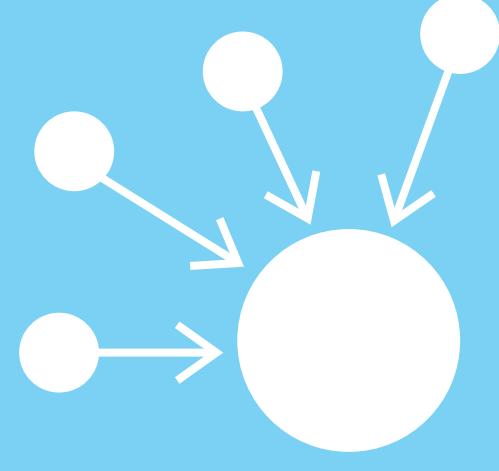


Increasing levels of community engagement



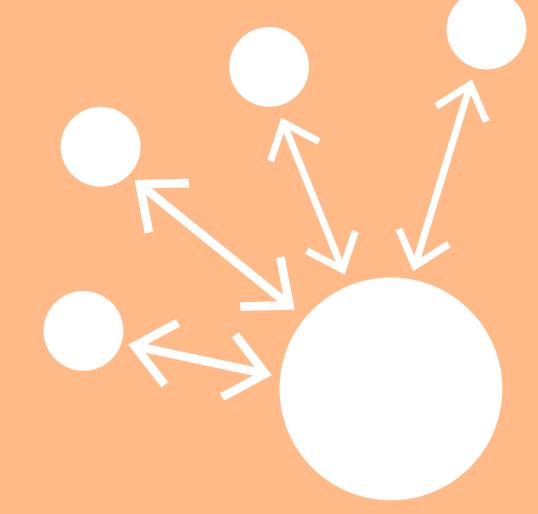
Inform

Provide people and communities with balanced and objective information about our services and decisions we take about those services



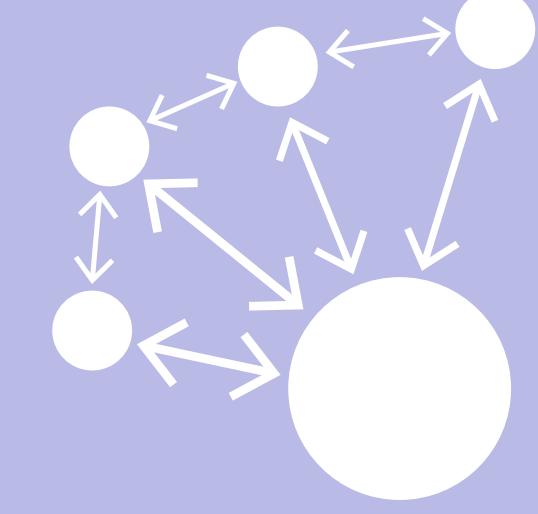
Consult

Gather and deeply consider feedback and input on issues, ideas and decisions taken about our services so we understand community views



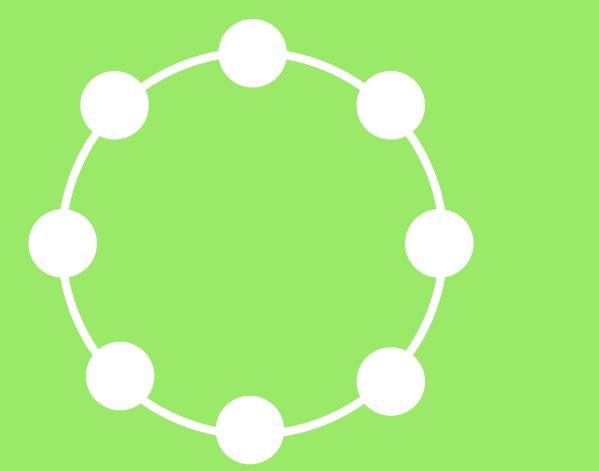
Involve

Work directly with communities to understand issues, needs and aspirations to ensure they are reflected in the development of service options and our decisions



Collaborate

Work in partnership with communities, sharing the decisions taken to change, improve or design new services and programmes, embedding partnership working in all decisions



Empower

The community owns change, and the council is a stakeholder to help implement that change – the community can create and deliver services and programmes



**Four focus areas to help us
achieve the purpose and
aims of our consultation
and engagement strategy**

1

Understand Communities in Exeter

What we'll do

- Implement a continuous 'Community Insight' programme that generates qualitative and quantitative evidence about needs, preferences, barriers, and assets across Exeter's wards and neighbourhoods.
- Develop a citywide 'Voices Index' that tracks and highlights representative resident voice and identifies gaps (e.g. digitally excluded, young people, older residents, carers, disabled residents, minority language speakers).
- Work closely with all stakeholders to increase our visibility and trust in our methods and approaches to consultation and engagement.

How we'll do it

- **Use mixed-methods research:** surveys & quick-polls (online + paper), interviews (telephone & face-to-face), focus groups, ethnography, empathy mapping, workshops.
- **Broad engagement tools:** youth forums, use social & traditional media, college/ university partnerships, healthcare provider partnerships, daytime, evening & weekend sessions, large-print options, audio and visual information.
- **Amplify voice of rarely heard from groups:** use interpreters when appropriate, work with community builders, supply refreshments at events, run child friendly events.
- **Utilise existing data & links:** work closely with internal teams (e.g. housing) and partner with community groups and organisations to share insights and community mapping, as well as access to a broad range of service users.

Expected Outcomes

Running a continuous programme of engagement will support us to:

1. *Gather data and insights to support more effective and targeted consultation and engagement activities*
2. *Form stronger, trusting working relationships with communities, groups, and organisations in the city*

2

Define Scope & Objectives of All Activities

What we'll do

- Align consultation and engagement activities to the Corporate Plan 2025–2028 priority areas and statutory requirements (e.g. for housing, commercial assets, etc), prioritised by urgency of need and impact on residents.
- Ensure that the objectives of consultation and engagement activities are always clear.
- Strive to hear diverse community voices that are proportionately weighted to visibly influence decisions the Council makes.
- Build consistency, buy-in, and ownership of consultation and engagement activities across Exeter City Council services.

How we'll do it

- **Forward planning:** publish annual roadmap detailing planned consultations and linking to the Corporate Plan.
- **Equality impact assessments:** each consultation activity will have an EQIA completed prior to launch, highlighting residents most impacted by potential change and guiding how we will engage with them.
- **Consistent communication standards:** accessible plain-English summaries, further information, visual storytelling, short audio versions, translations.
- **ECC governance:** cross-service Consultation & Engagement group meet regularly to review consultation plans, risks, and evaluation/ reporting.
- **Regular reporting:** accessible reporting with community voices front and centre (e.g. 'you said—we did') – targeting 12-weeks after the end of a consultation.

Expected Outcomes

Defining the scope and objectives of all consultation and engagement activities, will help us to:

1. *Clearly demonstrate our body of work in this area, setting realistic expectations for residents and increasing transparency and trust in our processes.*
2. *Increase and improve accountability for consultation and engagement activities across all ECC service areas.*

3

Innovative, Inclusive & Representative Methods

What we'll do

- Embrace innovation to help us reach more people continuously, in ways they want and expect.
- Reach a more diverse range of people and communities through consultation and engagement.
- Share best practice across the whole of ECC and engage with partners outside of ECC to learn from them.
- Enhance the confidence and power of community voices, encouraging active citizenship.
- Deliver consultation and engagement work that is representative of Exeter's population, so we don't just hear the loudest voices.
- *where capacity and allocation of funding allow (e.g. resident survey)*

How we'll do it

- **Maintain & develop Engage Exeter:** a single online home for all consultation and engagement activities, but with awareness that 'online' is not for everyone.
- **Go to where people are:** pop-up engagement (markets, libraries, sports fixtures) and partnerships with, community spaces, ECC places and local institutions.
- **Creative options for feedback:** scenario labs, world café formats, priority voting tools - combining in-person with online participation.
- **Community representation:** recruit members to join existing community panels (youth, older adults, disability, carers, renters, minority language speakers); and explore peer research models.
- **Look to the future:** constantly explore new ways to support and improve participation and equity in our work.

Expected Outcomes

Adopting innovative, inclusive and representative methods for consultation and engagement, will help us to:

1. *Improve the reach and diversity of voice in our consultation and engagement work to support decision making processes.*
2. *Offer involvement processes that residents want and expect, now and in the future.*

4

Prototype, Test & Improve

What we'll do

- Introduce a test and learn culture for consultation and engagement work across ECC service areas – if mistakes are made, they are owned, communicated and learnt from.
- Openness and transparency in our work and methods and processes we use for consultation and engagement work.
- Evaluate processes and methods to understand what works and adapt them to meet shifting needs.

How we'll do it

- **Pilot method 'sprints':** run small scale and focused engagement activities which have clear success metrics with the potential to scale.
- **Robust feedback opportunities:** run participant experience surveys (paper/phone/online), and community retrospectives related to consultation and engagement activities – sharing findings with ECC service areas and participants.
- **Review & Adapt:** Yearly method reviews and updates; publish 'What we tested / What we changed' report.
- **Open learning:** host 'lunch and learn' sessions and share case studies internally and with partners to spread effective practices for consultation and engagement activities.

Expected Outcomes

Testing, prototyping and improving our consultation and engagement methods and process, will help us to:

1. *Be able to identify areas for continuous improvement.*
2. *Strive for improvements in transparency, to improve trust in our methods and processes.*



Implementing the consultation and engagement strategy

Enablers

To be successful in implementing this strategy and improving our consultation and engagement activities, we have identified the following enablers:

- **Accountability:** All ECC service areas are accountable in achieving the four focus areas of the strategy to improve consultation and engagement activities.
 - *The strategy will work in tandem with the [Consultation Charter](#) – increasing expectations of consultation delivery and accountability*
- **Launch & Embed:** Publish the strategy in multiple formats (web, print, audio) both internally and externally to raise awareness and maintain its relevance to our work.
- **Monitor & Adapt:** Develop robust data monitoring tools such as dashboards and hold regular check-ins during active consultation and engagement activities.
- **Capability Building:** The strategy is ambitious, so to meet that ambition we will train staff in co-design principles, research methods, inclusive facilitation, plain-English writing, accessibility standards, and trauma-informed approaches.
- **Benchmarking:** We will compare our outputs and progress in our drive to improve consultation and engagement activities with other local authorities, sharing best practice.
- **Partnerships:** Explore formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) with key partners to share venues, communication channels, interpreters, and data standards.



Key principles and ways of working to help us meet the aspirations of our four focus areas

Empathy

We enter consultation and engagement work with this mindset and prioritise understanding and addressing the community needs and concerns. We don't consider ourselves as the experts

Equity

We make our consultation and engagement activities equitable, so we hear diverse views and opinions to avoid self-selection bias. We are open to learning opportunities to improve inclusive practices

Collaboration

We strive to always involve diverse stakeholders, including residents, community organisations, community groups, and local businesses.

Co-Design

When and where appropriate, we will co-design with residents and communities to we work in partnership and embed user voice into our work and services.

Transparency

Ensure clear communication about our consultation and engagement processes, the topics we are exploring, and how community input will be used.

Time

Awareness of time needed to build strong relationships and links to ensure that we are building an accurate and representative picture of communities in Exeter.

Trust

Following these principles overtime will foster trust until it becomes the foundation of our consultation and engagement work.

Flexibility

Be adaptable and open to changing the strategy, methods, and approaches based on feedback and new insights.

Accountability

We are strong with the accountability for delivering on this strategy across all ECC service areas, and report to residents with clarity and humility.

Satisfy the Gunning Principles

The Gunning Principles form an important pillar of our Consultation Charter and so are very relevant to this strategy. Delivering on the four focus areas of this strategy, meeting our key principles, and improving our ways are all aspiration that will take us past satisfying the Gunning Principles – however this does not mean they should not be used and referred to when holding us account for our consultation activities.

The Gunning Principles are:

1. Proposals are still at a formative stage.
2. There is sufficient information to give ‘intelligent consideration’.
3. There is adequate time for consideration and response.
4. 'Conscientious consideration' must be given to the consultation responses before a decision is made.

[The Gunning Principles can be viewed in full](#)

Link to Central Government Civil Society Covenant

This is a new agreement to improve and reset the relationship between civil society and government. As this Covenant evolves over time, we will work to ensure that we use it to improve our consultation and engagement activities, enhance and strengthen our working relationships with stakeholders in Exeter, and improve shared learning.

The key principles of the Civil Society Covenant are:

- **Recognition:** To ensure a strong and independent civil society.
- **Partnership:** to ensure effective service delivery and policy making, and shared learning of best practices.
- **Participation:** to ensure people and communities can be heard and make a difference.
- **Transparency:** to ensure civil society and government have the information needed to best serve people and communities.

[More information regarding the Civil Society Covenant](#)

Measuring Success

How much	How well	How connected
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase in the number of people taking part in consultations• Increase in diversity of participant voice• Increase in representative participation• Increase in activities linked to community engagement across ECC• Increase meaningful attendance at activities linked to community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase in positive feedback from those we consult and engage with• Increase in 'on time' public reporting and feedback to participants• Reduction in Freedom of Information requests linked to consultations• Residents feel safe and supported to participate in consultation and engagement activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase in people feeling like they have a say• Increase in number of people who feel listened to and respected• Increase in the number of people who have trust in the council's consultation and engagement processes• Increased partnership working with all stakeholders

Tell us what you think



We have put a lot of thought into this strategy and have incorporated changes based on feedback received after a 6-week public consultation. However, the strategy will be reviewed so that we can aim to continuously improve consultation and engagement activities in Exeter. We are open to ideas and suggestions for improvement. If you have any comments or suggestions, please get in touch with us using the contact details.

This strategy is about driving improvement and making sure that people have a voice on the issues that affect them and can help shape services, neighbourhood priorities, and citywide priorities.



[Contact Us](#)



[Engage Exeter](#)