

Future Northants External Engagement Strategy

1. Purpose

This strategy is designed to set the overall principles for engagement and consultation with external stakeholders in the Future Northants programme. While it is acknowledged that the programme will result in two unitary authorities with their own identities and priorities, this strategy represents a shared desire to engage with stakeholders to ensure that the new local government landscape in Northamptonshire meets the needs of residents, service users and partners.

For the purposes of this strategy, staff, councillors and trade unions are considered internal stakeholders.

2. Context

The Government is proposing to create two new unitary councils in Northamptonshire to provide all local government services in the county. This would come into being on 1 April 2021 and Northamptonshire's current eight councils will cease to exist.

The new North Northamptonshire unitary authority will cover the areas of Corby Borough Council, East Northamptonshire Council, Kettering Borough Council and Borough of Wellingborough Council. A new unitary council for West Northamptonshire will cover the areas of Daventry District Council, Northampton Borough Council and South Northamptonshire Council. Services currently provided by Northamptonshire County Council and the districts and boroughs will be delivered by the two new councils.

The creation of North Northamptonshire Council and West Northamptonshire Council is an opportunity to develop and transform services so they deliver what residents and businesses need, are modern and provide good value for money. The ongoing process of engagement will play an important role in achieving this.

3. Principles

This strategy will be delivered by Northamptonshire's current local authorities, and will be used by the Shadow Authorities as the programme moves through the different phases until the proposed Go Live date for the two unitary authorities of 1 April 2021. The strategy will ensure that engagement activity is:

- accessible and inclusive
- genuine and honest
- appropriate for the purpose
- compliant with any statutory requirements
- efficient, using existing mechanisms and forums where possible

- used to inform the development of unitary authorities, and that how this happens is fed back to stakeholders.

The strategy covers the spectrum of consultation and engagement from specific and formal consultation to the broader and more varied types of engagement activity.

4. Objectives

The primary objective of this Strategy is to ensure that opportunities for engaging external stakeholders (partners, service users and the wider public) are used to support the development of the new unitary authorities.

Engagement and consultation can help develop more robust commissioning plans for the new unitary authorities by:

- Considering and involving different perspectives to gain a more comprehensive view of what is needed
- Helping to prioritise and plan better services through wider experiences
- Fostering innovation as ideas for better services can come from all areas of our community
- Raising awareness and creating wider understanding of the role of the new unitary authorities and the commissioning process.
- Informing people of how the change to unitary will, or will not, affect the services they receive

The Future Northants Programme has a number of phases, and the engagement strategy will evolve alongside the projects as they progress.

5. Resources

Each of the eight authorities undertakes consultation and engagement activity to some extent, although this is often done as part of another role, e.g. consulting on planning matters by Planning staff, engagement alongside communications activity by Communications staff. Only NCC has a Consultation Team consisting of 2.5 FTE. There are no dedicated consultation resources within the Future Northants Programme Team.

The majority of consultation and engagement activity will therefore need to be sought externally and will have cost implications. Each portfolio will need to scope out the level of consultation and engagement required for their projects to create a programme engagement plan which will then be costed.

Costs of practical tools e.g. consultation software personalised to the two unitary authorities, the hire of venues, provision of refreshments, reimbursements for participants will also need to be considered, although every effort will be made to use existing resources.

A toolkit to support consultation and engagement activity will be produced to accompany this strategy. Advice and guidance on statutory requirements can be provided from existing specialist resource, alongside the planning of engagement activity.

6. Governance

External consultation and engagement activity within each programme area will be planned and agreed by the Programme Manager and Communications Lead and signed off by the Senior Responsible Officer (SRO). Planned activity will be fed in to an overarching Consultation and Engagement Planner for the Programme, which will be managed and monitored by the Future Northants Communications and Engagement Lead.

7. Stakeholders

Everyone who lives and/or works in Northamptonshire has an interest in the creation of the two new unitary authorities.

Common top-line external stakeholders across the Future Northants programme are:

1. **MPs, Whitehall and Westminster**
2. **Public service delivery partners** (NHS, Police and so on)
3. **Town and Parish Councils** (recognised separately from other partners, due to their strategic importance)
4. **The voluntary and community sector**
5. **General public** (of whom specific service users are an important subset)
6. **The business sector** (businesses, LEPs, local chambers of commerce, Federation of Small Businesses, BIDs, Oxford/Cambridge corridor organisations)
7. **Other partner organisations** (including neighbouring authorities).
8. **Suppliers & contractors**

The following matrix plots the above stakeholders (identifiable by list number) considering the following key factors:

- **Influence** – are they powerful or influential either directly in their decision making ability or in how loud, well-placed or authoritative their voice is?
- **Interest/informed** – how interested is that stakeholder at the moment in this process?

External stakeholders' matrix



Each programme will adopt a similar approach to identify and plot its own set of stakeholders with specific interest in the projects that are being developed and delivered in that area. This will be used to determine the level of engagement required with each audience.

8. Risks

The following risks should be considered as part of the consultation and engagement approach of the programme, and ultimately the two unitary authorities. These may also change over time and may need to be reviewed.

- Too much divergence in the approach to consultation and engagement leads to feelings of dissatisfaction and inequality between the stakeholders of the North and West authorities
- The scope of the programme and the scarcity of consultation and engagement resources amongst existing staff means that requirements around consultation and engagement are not met. Furthermore, that

statutory consultation is not carried out which raises the risk of legal challenge

- The desire to adopt an individual consultation and engagement approach for each unitary authority could result in duplication and increased costs
- Consultation and engagement activities are viewed as tokenistic by stakeholders which in turn could lead to lack of engagement and dissatisfaction with the Future Northants programme.

9. Consultation and engagement channels

Full use will be made of existing channels available to the eight authorities, alongside others as required, depending on resource and cost.

Existing external engagement channels include:

- **Online consultations** (e.g. surveys via council websites, online consultation hubs)
- **Residents' Panels**
- **Focus groups**
- **Public meetings and drop-in events**
- **Town and parish council and community forums**
- **Informal online participation** (such as feedback and comments via existing social media channels)
- **All channels identified in the Communications Strategy** – engagement and communications complement each other closely and more informal engagement can dovetail with communications messages issued via channels ranging from social media and press updates to residents' magazines and community publications.

10. Review and evaluation

Future actions for implementing this strategy will include reviewing and evaluating the effectiveness of the councils' existing channels and resources for external engagement and exploring opportunities to share and improve these ahead of the new unitary authorities. Examples might include aggregating/disaggregating existing people's panels and focus groups to tailor them towards the two new unitary authorities, reviewing and consolidating online consultation software etc.

Engagement activity will be evaluated and reviewed on a rolling basis by each programme team to identify any opportunities for improvement.