

Draft

Consultation and Engagement Strategy

2026 to 2030





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Introduction

Welcome to Canterbury City Council's Consultation and Engagement Strategy.

Our aim is to make sure the decisions we take reflect the experiences and needs of the people who live, work and study in our district.

This strategy has been shaped by the voices of our community. By speaking with residents, businesses and community stakeholders, we have created a framework that reflects what matters to you.

Your input has helped us design an approach that is inclusive and responsive.

At the heart of this strategy is a commitment to co-production – working with our community to design and deliver services that address their priorities and build pride in where they live.

This approach builds shared ownership, encourages creativity and delivers positive outcomes.

We know that consultation can sometimes feel like a tick-box exercise – something the council does to satisfy a requirement rather than genuinely listen. This strategy is designed to involve people earlier, be honest about how feedback is used and work alongside communities rather than simply asking for their views.

Strong and meaningful engagement is especially important as we go through the process of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Becoming part of a larger unitary authority is a major change. While it may bring new opportunities, it also raises questions about how local voices will continue to influence decisions.

We want to make sure that engagement becomes even stronger through this transition, not weaker.

This approach supports our Corporate Plan, Restoring Pride to Our District, which emphasises partnership, innovation and sustainability.

By placing engagement into our day-to-day work and into the LGR transition, we can ensure our communities remain empowered, informed and involved in shaping their future.

This strategy represents our commitment to strengthening relationships, breaking down barriers and delivering meaningful change. We encourage you to explore this strategy and engage with us as we move forward.



What is consultation?

Consultation is the process of asking for feedback from the community before making decisions. It helps the council understand people's views, concerns and ideas, so we can make better decisions.

For example, asking residents what they think about a new service or policy before a decision is made on the outcome. Consultation is not a referendum. While community input is considered, the council retains the responsibility for making the final decision.

Why is it important?

Consultation ensures decisions are well-informed, transparent and the views of the community are considered. Done well, it builds trust and shows that the council values public input.

What is engagement?

Engagement is a broader, ongoing relationship with the community, where people are involved throughout the decision-making process, not just at the beginning.

It includes regular communication, working together on projects and keeping people informed.

Why is it important?

Engagement creates stronger, more connected communities by making people feel involved and valued.

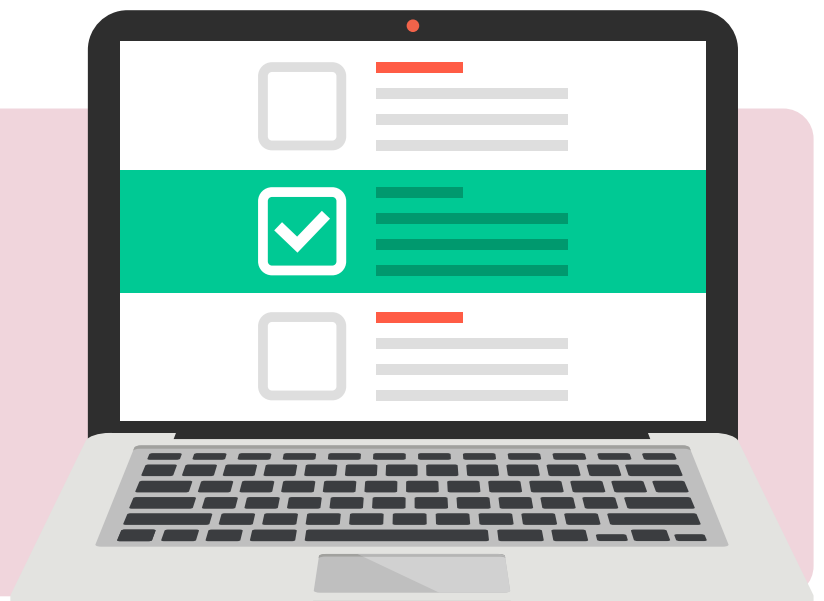
It leads to better decisions and outcomes, informed by an ongoing conversation with the community.

Bringing consultation and engagement together

Consultation and engagement go hand in hand to build relationships with our community.

Consultation ensures people's voices are heard on specific issues or proposals, while engagement builds ongoing relationships that encourage collaboration and positive outcomes over time.

Together, they empower residents to take an active role in shaping the future of the district, building trust, teamwork and shared responsibility for what matters most.



We asked, you said (early engagement)

Quick feedback survey

We received 274 responses to our early engagement pulse survey which helped us understand how our community views the council's current engagement efforts and the improvements they want to see.

Who responded

- 89.1% were residents of the district
- 5.1% represented voluntary or community sector groups
- 1.5% were local businesses
- Other respondents included councillors and individuals identifying as 'Other'.

What we do well

Respondents highlighted several strengths in our engagement efforts, including:

- Offering various channels for feedback (34.7%)
- Providing clear and timely information (30.3%)
- Actively seeking input from diverse community groups (17.5%)
- However, areas like transparency in decision-making (9.5%) and responding effectively to feedback (10.2%) were identified as needing improvement.

Challenges faced

The biggest barriers to participation were:

- Lack of awareness about engagement opportunities (59.5%)
- Perceived lack of impact of feedback (51.8%)
- Difficulty accessing information or meetings (31.8%).

Suggested improvements

You recommended the following changes to improve engagement:

- Better promotion of engagement opportunities (61.3%)
- More frequent and varied communication methods (54.7%)



- Greater transparency in how feedback is used (50.4%)
- Enhanced accessibility for people with disabilities (25.9%).

Community workshops

We hosted workshops with a range of groups, including voluntary and community sector organisations, societies, key district organisations, cultural groups, student representatives, parish councils, the BeConnected Panel and the Tenant Disability Forum. These workshops offered valuable insights into what we're doing well, the barriers people face, and how we can improve.

What you told us

Strengths

Participants recognised:

- A willingness to improve and openness to collaboration (societies, parish councils)
- Effective face-to-face engagement and addressing digital exclusion (parish councils, Tenant Disability Forum)
- Growing use of social media and lived experience in consultations (voluntary groups, BeConnected Panel).

Barriers and challenges

Common challenges raised included:

- **Trust issues:** A lack of transparency, perceived tokenism and no visibility of impact (all groups)
- **Accessibility concerns:** Barriers include cultural, physical, digital and intellectual limitations (key organisations, Tenant Disability Forum)
- **Complexity:** Information overload, jargon-heavy communications and unclear council responsibilities (societies, parish councils)
- **Engagement gaps:** Underrepresentation of certain groups, apathy and limited consultation methods (all groups)

Suggested improvements

Across the workshops, participants shared actionable ideas, such as:

- **Better communication:** Simplify language, avoid jargon, personalise content and precheck materials with outside groups (societies, voluntary groups)

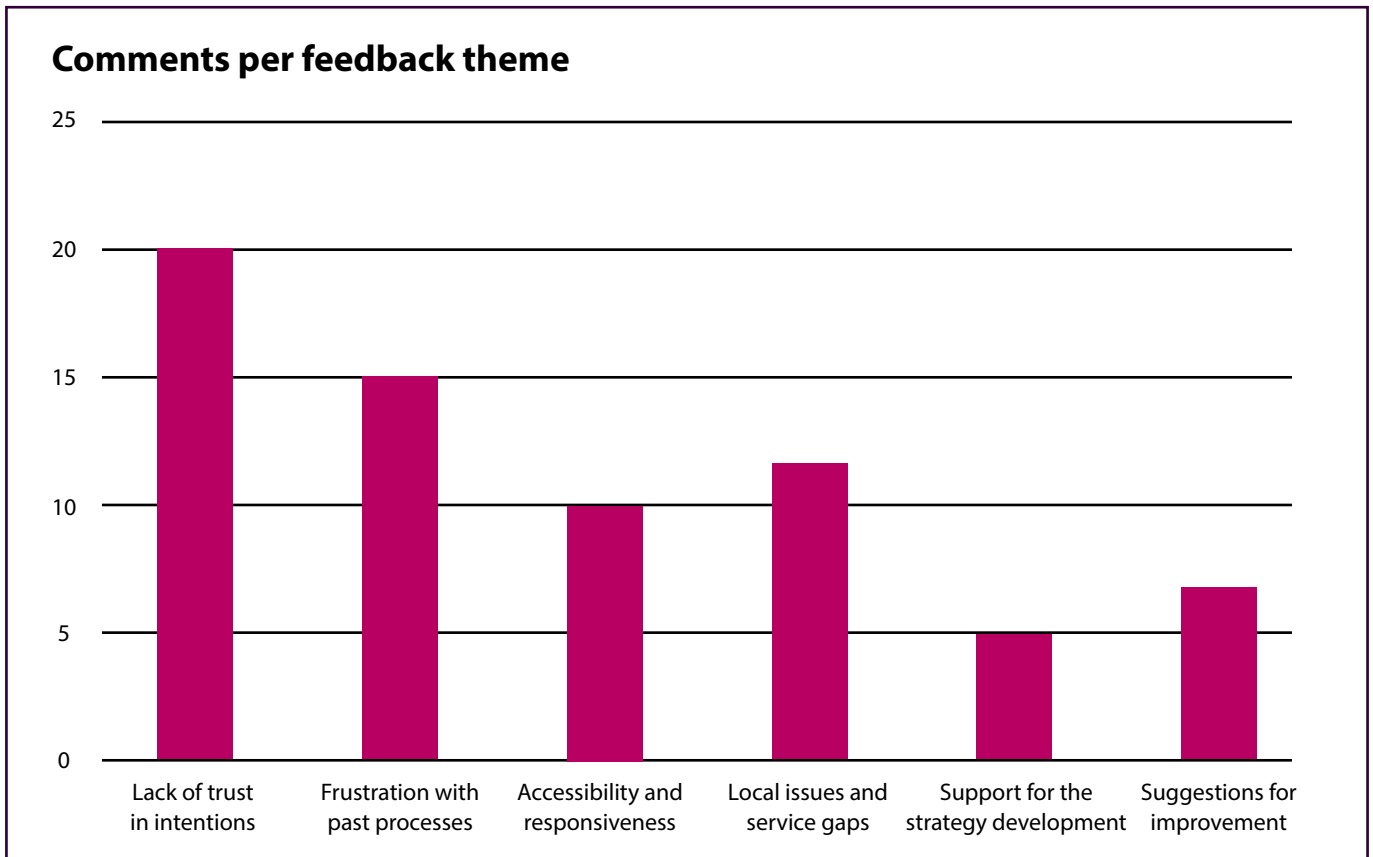
- **Engage diverse communities:** Tailor outreach to young people, underrepresented groups and those with digital limitations (parish councils, BeConnected Panel)
- **Transparency and follow-up:** Provide clear feedback, show how input influences outcomes and set measurable engagement principles (Tenant Disability Forum)
- **Innovative engagement methods:** Use fun and interactive consultations, leverage existing community networks and adapt to new media platforms (key organisations, voluntary groups)

Social media feedback

In response to our recent engagement pulse survey shared on social media, we received feedback in the comments sections of our posts.

The feedback is categorised into six primary themes:

- Lack of trust in intentions
- Frustration with past processes
- Accessibility and responsiveness
- Local issues and service gaps
- Support for the strategy development
- Suggestions for improvement



National and local context

Consultation and engagement are shaped by national trends and local challenges, and both affect how we connect with our communities.

National context

Councils have a clear responsibility to involve their communities in decision-making.

In most cases, the law sets out how this must be done and several key pieces of legislation guide how we consult and engage:

- The Local Government Act (1999) and Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007) encourage councils to involve people in shaping services to ensure decisions are informed by those who will be affected.
- The Equality Act (2010) highlights the need to engage with underrepresented groups, helping councils create more inclusive policies.
- The Health and Social Care Act (2012) reminds us to listen to those who use our services, ensuring their voices help shape the support they receive.
- The Social Housing (Regulation) Act (2023) requires housing providers to work meaningfully with tenants, giving them a real say in how their homes are managed.
- The Localism Act (2011) gives communities more power to influence local decisions, encouraging councils to share responsibility for shaping local areas.

On top of this, the Gunning Principles set out what good consultation looks like.

These principles say we need to engage early, provide the right information to enable informed responses, allow enough time for feedback and, importantly, take that feedback seriously when making decisions.

Evolving best practice

Councils and local organisations are increasingly adopting more collaborative approaches to consultation.

Co-production, for example, is gaining recognition as best practice.

Unlike traditional consultation, co-production involves working alongside residents and stakeholders as equal partners to design and deliver services.

This approach builds shared ownership, strengthens trust and often leads to more effective solutions.

Local context

In our district, the need for meaningful engagement is further driven by our unique challenges and opportunities. These include:

- **Local Government Reorganisation (LGR):** the process of LGR will significantly reshape local governance, bringing both opportunities and challenges. As we transition towards a larger unitary authority over the coming years, it is essential our residents feel informed, heard and involved in shaping the future of local services. This strategy reinforces our commitment to ensuring that community voices play a central role in influencing the transition and implementation.
- **Financial constraints:** reduced funding means tough decisions must be made and early engagement ensures resources are directed to where they are most needed.
- **Diverse communities:** our district spans urban and rural areas, with varying needs that require tailored, inclusive approaches to consultation and engagement.
- **Rebuilding pride:** residents have expressed a strong desire to play an active role in shaping their communities and this strategy reflects our commitment to listen and respond.
- **Sustainability and liveability:** addressing climate, housing and other challenges requires collaborative efforts to find answers to problems together to benefit current and future generations.

Given these dynamics, we know that we must adapt our consultation approaches to be more inclusive, accessible and reflective of the diverse needs of our community.

The changes brought by LGR will make this more critical than ever.

Aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Our strategy aligns with several UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Goal 10 is about reducing inequalities. We support this by actively reaching out to people who are often left out of council decision making.

Goal 11 is about sustainable cities and communities. We support this by making sure people have a real say in decisions that shape where they live.

Goal 16 is about strong and trusted institutions. We support this by being open about how decisions are made and following through on what we say we will do.

Goal 17 is about working in partnership. We support this by involving residents, community groups and other organisations in our work rather than acting alone.



Our guiding principles

Our approach to consultation and engagement is shaped by the vision and priorities set out in our Corporate Plan. We want to empower residents and help build pride in our district.

Our engagement principles guide how we involve people in our work. They help make sure engagement isn't something we do occasionally, but a normal and important part of how we design services and make decisions.

We use the PARTS framework to describe these principles:

PARTS

Proactive engagement:

We involve people as early as we can. By reading our before decisions are made, we give residents and stakeholders the chance to help shape ideas from the start. This supports our aim of working in partnership with the community.

Accessibility:

We make our engagement as easy to take part in as possible. This means contacting people who have previously been underrepresented and making sure everyone can share their views, no matter their background or circumstances.

Responsiveness:

We listen to what people tell us and show how their feedback influences decisions. Being responsive helps build trust and ensures we focus on what matters most to the community.

Transparency:

We are open about what we're doing, why we're doing it and how decisions are made. Clear and honest communication helps people understand the process and feel confident in the council's work.

Supporting communities:

Supporting our communities means working closely with community groups, sharing knowledge, breaking down silos and prioritising the building of trust and the shared ownership of creative answers to problems.



Objectives

Objective 1:

Engage people early to shape policies together

We want to involve people as early as possible when we develop new policies and services. Early engagement helps us understand concerns and ideas before decisions are made, which leads to better outcomes for everyone.

Where needed, we will speak to residents and stakeholders early on through surveys, workshops and focus groups. These activities can help shape the direction of our work instead of only reacting to final proposals.

This builds trust, makes policies more relevant and helps people feel their voices genuinely matter.

To ensure we meet this objective we will:

- Host workshops and focus groups early in the development of new policies, where it makes sense to do so

- Develop a set of co-production principles to guide how we work with communities, including during LGR
- Make engagement as standard part of how we plan projects, starting from the beginning rather than added later

Objective 2:

Include all voices, especially the underrepresented

We want everyone in the district to have the chance to take part, especially people who are often underrepresented. Including a wider range of voices helps us understand different needs and make more inclusive decisions.

To ensure we meet this objective we will:

- Improve outreach by working with local groups
- Use targeted and tailored communication methods
- Pilot pop up events within community centres and local areas of interest
- Expand partnerships with local universities and schools
- Look at our data in more detail to understand different needs, so we can adapt our services accordingly
- Explore opportunities for joint business engagement initiatives with LGR partners

Objective 3:

Equip our staff for strong engagement

We want staff and councillors to have the tools, skills and confidence to carry out effective engagement. This ensures residents have consistent experience across the council.

By creating a structured approach to engagement, we can ensure all our consultations are effective, accessible and align with best practices.



To ensure we meet this objective we will:

- Utilise our new best practice toolkit for staff which has detailed guidance on engagement
- Deliver training sessions for staff and councillors
- Set clear measures of success, so we can regularly check if our engagement is working

Objective 4:

Make it clear how community input shapes our choices

We want residents to understand how their input influences council decisions. Being open about this builds trust and encourages people to stay involved.

When residents can see how their contributions shape policies and services, they are more likely to engage in future consultations.

To ensure we meet this objective we will:

- Develop a consultation and engagement hub so residents can easily track the progress of a consultation
- Pilot a consultation calendar so people can see what is coming up and plan to get involved
- Alongside a regular consultation report, produce a summary report after consultations that clearly explains what people said
- When we have consent to do so, ensure everyone who takes part in a consultation hears back from us once a decision has been made

Objective 5:

Collate frequent feedback to understand community priorities

We want to gather frequent, timely insights to we can respond to changing community needs. Regular feedback helps ensure services stay relevant and decisions reflect what matters most to residents.

This objective is important because understanding the evolving priorities of residents is crucial for effective governance.

To ensure we meet this objective we will:

- Pilot surveys twice a year to help us understand community priorities
- Improve how consultation data is reported by incorporating relevant demographic insights and participation statistics
- Place QR code feedback points in libraries, leisure centres and other council buildings so residents can share their views quickly and anonymously

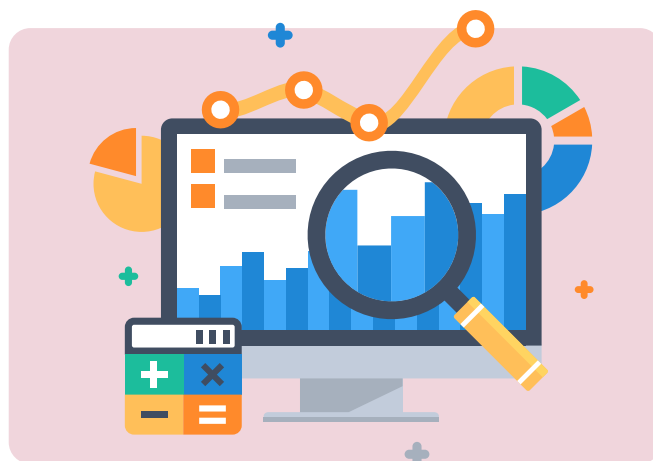


How we will monitor progress

Monitoring our consultation and engagement work is essential to ensuring we meet our objectives and continuously improve. By tracking key metrics and regularly assessing our activities, we will identify successes, address challenges and adjust our approach as needed.

Key performance indicators

The table sets out the metrics we will use to measure success. These will be reviewed annually and updated as the strategy develops.



Objective	What we will measure	Target
Engage early	Proportion of projects with engagement built in from the start	40% by Year 2
Include all voices	Breadth of participation, including geographic spread, group type representation and proportion of first-time respondents	Responses received from at least five different areas of the district Proportion of first time respondents increases year on year
Equip staff	Proportion of staff who have completed engagement training	40% by year 2
Show how input shapes decisions	Percentage of consultations with a published you said / we did summary	75% by year 3
Gather regular feedback	Frequency of community feedback touchpoints by year	Minimum two a year

Regular reporting and feedback loops

Progress reports will be shared internally and publicly, outlining our successes, challenges and how community input has shaped decisions.

Where possible, we will also gather feedback after engagement activities to improve our efforts in future.

Continuous improvement

Based on monitoring results and feedback from residents, we will continue to review our approach and refine our practices.

This will include regularly updating staff training to maintain high standards of consultation and engagement across the council.

Stakeholder collaboration

We will collaborate with community groups, organisations and businesses to gather insights and ensure our engagement methods remain inclusive and relevant.

By monitoring these areas, we will ensure our strategy remains responsive, transparent, and aligned with the evolving needs of the district.

Action plan

Delivering our objectives

This strategy outlines five key objectives that will guide how we approach consultation across the council.

To ensure these objectives are translated into meaningful action, we have developed a detailed action plan.

This action plan will be kept under review, allowing us to respond to emerging opportunities while maintaining our commitment to high-quality engagement.

The table below details how we will put our objectives into practice.

Action	Owner	Timeframe
Objective 1: Engage people early to share policies together		
Host workshops and focus groups early in the development of new policies, where it makes sense to do so	Across teams	Short term
Develop a set of co-production principles to guide how we work with communities, including during LGR	Policy and Communications	Medium term
Make engagement as standard part of how we plan projects, starting from the beginning rather than added later	Across teams	Short term
Objective 2: Include all voices, especially the underrepresented		
Improve outreach by working with local groups	Across teams	Medium term
Use targeted and tailored communication methods	Policy and Communications	Short term
Pilot pop up events within community centres and local areas of interest	Across teams	Medium term
Expand partnerships with local universities and schools	Policy and Communications	Medium term
Look at our data in more detail to understand different needs, so we can adapt our services accordingly	Across teams	Medium term
Explore opportunities for joint business engagement initiatives with LGR partners	Policy and Communications	Medium to long term

Action	Owner	Timeframe
Objective 3: Equip our staff for strong engagement		
Utilise our new best practice toolkit for staff which has detailed guidance on engagement	Policy and Communications	Short term
Deliver training sessions for staff and councillors	Policy and Communications	Medium to long term
Set clear measures of success, so we can regularly check if our engagement is working	Policy and Communications	Medium term
Objective 4: Make it clear how community input shapes our choices		
Develop a consultation and engagement hub so residents can easily track the progress of a consultation	Policy and Communications	Short to medium term
Pilot a consultation calendar so people can see what is coming up and plan to get involved	Policy and Communications	Short to medium term
Alongside a regular consultation report, produce a summary report after consultations that clearly explains what people said	Policy and Communications	Short term
When we have consent to do so, ensure everyone who takes part in a consultation hears back from us once a decision has been made	Policy and Communications	Short term
Objective 5: Collate frequent feedback to understand community priorities		
Pilot surveys twice a year to help us understand community priorities	Policy and Communications	Medium to long term
Improve how consultation data is reported by incorporating relevant demographic insights and participation statistics	Policy and Communications	Medium term
Place QR code feedback points in libraries, leisure centres and other council buildings so residents can share their views quickly and anonymously	Policy and Communications	Medium term