

		AGENDA ITEM 6
		CSS/07/13
Committee:	Corporate Scrutiny Committee	
Date:	23 July 2013	

Engaging with Essex residents

1. Essex County Council (ECC) has a longstanding commitment to engaging residents and communities, and gathering their views on the issues that matter to them. In support of this commitment, this paper proposes a specific campaign – *Your Essex, let's talk* – to engage residents and communities.
2. This campaign is not intended to replace ECC's established engagement mechanisms. There will remain a need to engage residents on service-specific issues through Essex Insight; online consultation portals for Schools and Planning services; established service user/planning groups and through programmes of targeted local research (including surveys, focus groups and resident workshops). Nor is *Your Essex, let's talk* designed to fulfill ECC's legal duty to consult with residents and service users in specific service changes. Rather, *Your Essex, let's talk* will provide an umbrella campaign under which ECC can:
 - a. initiate a dialogue with Essex residents and communities on the need for service change;
 - b. engage with communities of place/interest on specific changes that affect them; and
 - c. publicise substantive consultation exercises.

Your Essex, let's talk campaign

3. The need and desire to engage with communities has been a key theme throughout the development of Transformation Phase 2. We know that residents will see significant change in ECC services/service levels, and the decommissioning of some services, and that they will be encouraged to play a greater role in securing positive outcomes for themselves, their families and their neighbourhoods.
4. The objectives of the *Your Essex, let's talk* campaign will therefore be to ensure that residents and communities:
 - a. understand and accept the need for change/decommissioning in ECC services;
 - b. recognise that ECC is fair, open and transparent in its decision-making; and
 - c. feel that ECC has listened to, and considered, their views in reaching decisions.

5. It is proposed that ECC's Members initiate and act as the public face of the campaign.. This means playing an ever-more visible role in delivering messages directly to Essex communities and in securing advocacy support from partners and local opinion formers. It is proposed that Members lead this engagement activity through:
- a series of 'experiential' public roadshows held in Essex's big four towns – through these roadshows, Members will engage the public on the key challenges facing ECC; encourage residents to discuss these challenges with their families, neighbours etc; and will sign-up residents to join the on-going debate through social media channels;
 - a series of community summits with partners and invited community representatives in each district – supported and shaped by Locality Boards, these summits would focus on explaining ECC's financial challenges and signalling the need for future decommissioning decisions;
 - engagement through print, broadcast and social media – this could include series of articles published online and in the local press, regular media briefings, participation on the BBC Essex hotseat, online webchats and the publication of case studies to demonstrate service pressures. This could all be supported by engagement with residents through social media (the Leaders' blog, facebook, Twitter, Your Essex app Your Essex magazine); and
 - meetings with MPs, prospective parliamentary candidates – using existing channels to explain ECC's financial challenges and new vision, and to signal the need for future decommissioning decisions.
6. This engagement activity will be supported by advertising to encourage attendance a roadshows and to promote ECC's desire to engage more widely. It will also be supported by the creation of feedback mechanisms, allowing residents and communities to feedback their views to ECC through dedicated email, telephone and postal facilities, social media channels and interactive forums on the ECC website.

Supporting activity

7. In addition to this specific campaign activity, it is proposed that ECC take steps to make public meetings more accessible and transparent to the public. Rather than following other councils and introducing public question sessions into formal meetings – a mechanism that would allow only a limited number of people to participate and could favour those with a pre-existing understanding council processes – it is proposed that ECC incorporates webcasting into key formal meetings. Webcasting allows for the broadcast of live video and audio content over the internet to computers or mobile phones. Webcasting will make formal meetings accessible to a wider range of residents and will establish a full record of these meetings. This record can be used to balance the risk of inaccurate interpretations being made and distributed by media and social media users.
8. To ensure the *Your Essex, let's talk* campaign can achieve its objectives, it is important that it be based on a firm understanding of local attitudes to service change. In order to develop an evidence-base on this issue, it is proposed that ECC establishes a new 'research panel' of some 1,500 residents and conducts surveys (online and telephone

based) and focus groups with this groups to inform service changes/decommissioning decisions, and shape ECC's work to encourage residents to take on a greater role in securing outcomes.

9. A campaign of the type proposed above would, need to be launched in advance of any major decisions/key decommissioning announcements. Developing the campaign, and a specific campaign timetable, would require a lead in time of 12 weeks.

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