

Embedding community engagement through change in Harlow

Harlow is a place with opportunities and challenges both familiar to other areas and unique to itself, as well as opportunities and a will to succeed together. A product of the first wave of ‘new towns’ following the Second World War, Harlow’s growth was rapid. It was designed with a concept of community at its heart – as a town for new residents that housed them around communal and commercial areas, or ‘hatches’, in each neighbourhood.

The town has always taken pride in its sense of community, and the district council has enjoyed a close and direct relationship with residents. However, with economic and other pressures affecting both the community and the council itself, maintaining that positive relationship has become increasingly challenging. Reductions in local government funding has led to a decline in capacity at district level, and there is now a need, embraced by the council, to do more with less.

Community engagement is recognised within the council as an area where improvements can and should be made. Our work followed and built on a previous LGA review of community engagement. We were able to harness insight gathered through a further scoping exercise that had begun to identify the key challenges. The council Leader, Cllr Jon Clempner, signalled a particular interest in improving community engagement throughout the organisation.

Work with Harlow sought to uncover the assets at its disposal, particularly in terms of its people and the knowledge and experience they harbour. The aim was to suggest steps the council might take, over time, to develop a ‘whole system’ approach to consultation and engagement. The long-term aspiration in Harlow is that community engagement should provide solutions to significant capacity pressures by enabling more effective knowledge sharing and partnership working, both internally and externally. Evidence suggests there are plenty of examples of good engagement – and that there’s willingness to build on this. However, a more joined-up approach will be key.

The role of councillors in this process is recognised as vital. Many have expressed a strong desire that the organisation engage more effectively. We therefore considered how to support councillors better and align their role with the organisation’s wider engagement aims.

Working with a range of officers from across the council and councillors (including cabinet members, and front line councillors from majority and minority parties), key areas for action have been pinpointed. The action required in these areas is to be driven by an engagement narrative for the council as a whole. This tells the story of the approach to engagement throughout the organisation, endorsed by the leadership and understood by all.

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The Harlow Council pilot coincided with its customer service review. This is an area where there's a particular need to engage with residents to better understand what the community requires, in a wider sense, in terms of their relationship with the council. This will be a key testing ground for the tools and approaches that have been recommended as part of this work, and those have been supplemented with some guidance on best practice examples of channel shift engagement that Harlow Council could consider adopting. Not all will work perfectly, but this learning provides a useful internal case study which the council can adapt for wider use to inform their broader engagement approach.

Like district councils throughout the country, Harlow is seeking to change appropriately and quickly to equip its members, staff and partners with the right skills and systems to engage better in changing times. The lasting legacy of the New Conversations work in Harlow should be a confident approach to engagement, which itself can build capacity and help the council deliver honest and effective engagement throughout the organisation as a whole.

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