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# NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

8 September 2021

## Council

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**Title:** Processes for Future Consultations

**Purpose:** To provide an update on how future consultation would address the issues raised during the Review of Libraries, Halls and Community Centres and Development of Community Hubs.

**Recommendation:** That Council:

- a) Approves the recommendations for future consultations; and
- b) Authorises officers to implement the improvements.

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## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This update has been provided in response to a motion to Council on 9 June 2021 in relation to the Review of Libraries, Halls and Community Centres and Development of Community Hubs. Council agreed the motion by Councillor Billings, seconded by Councillor Marshall, in the following terms: “to review the feedback received from respondents regarding the consultation process and report back to the Council on how future consultation would address the issues raised”.
- 1.2 The consultation was developed with a Stakeholder Reference Group, in line with The Consultation Institute’s best practice recommendations, and a mixed methodology was developed, taking into account the context of the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. The consultation channels included phone calls, to ensure participation was not reliant on digital access while the Council’s public buildings were closed under the Covid-19 restrictions, and an open software platform called Consul, which is supported by CoSLA.
- 1.3 A question relating to the process was included in the consultation, with 140 (47%) saying it was easy to use and understand and 159 (53%) disagreeing. There were 77 responses relating to Consul.
- 1.4 A number of improvements will be discussed with the CoSLA CONSUL support team. In addition, in response to the feedback about other aspects of the consultation, the existing advice will be further strengthened on the Engagement Hub on the Community Planning Partnership website for implementation in future consultations.

## 2. Background

- 2.1 Engagement, consultation and working with communities to deliver successful outcomes are at the core of the Council's daily work. Consultation is the way public organisations get feedback from people about the work that they are doing. Consultation is carried out in many ways- for example it can be done online, by telephone or face to face. They can be carried out on any topic or subject. They can be national and be about, for example, influencing major policies, or they can be carried out locally to help take difficult decisions or find out what people think about local issues. Good consultations make sure that local people and communities are involved in the decisions that affect their lives from day to day.
- 2.2 In North Ayrshire, the approach that has been developed is the "co-define, co-design and co-deliver" model. This has been established in partnership with the Consultation Institute and in line with the National Standards for Community Engagement.
- 2.3 Over the years, the Council worked with The Consultation Institute to develop its approach to public consultation and engagement and that has enabled co-design and co-delivery with communities, including Locality Partnerships. An extensive programme of accredited consultation training and events was developed by the Council for the Community Planning Partnership. This was delivered by The Consultation Institute to over 150 staff from across the CPP including the North Ayrshire Council, Health and Social Care Partnership, Police Scotland, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and the Third Sector Interface. The 6-day training courses developed understanding across the CPP and provided the skills needed for equitable and robust consultation and engagement. North Ayrshire Council's approach to the co-design and co-delivery was awarded The Consultation Institute's 2016 Award for Consultation, secured 2 CoSLA Bronze Awards in 2017 and 2018, and was a finalist in the 2017 APSE awards. The Council's 2020 Best Value Audit Report notes: *The council is committed to community empowerment and its work to mainstream community input into day-to-day decision making is recognised nationally. Despite challenges, the council has worked to engage with hard-to-reach groups.*
- 2.4 The Council's existing Community Consultation Process has been designed meet the Institute's Charter Principles:
- Integrity – There must be an honest intent to consult;
  - Visibility – Communication with all must create a high level of awareness on how to participate;
  - Accessibility – It must be easy for those who wish to be involved, to become involved
  - Confidentiality and Transparency – The Freedom of Information Act makes it almost impossible to keep things confidential between public bodies, but all parties need to be aware of the public interest test and of the principles of openness and transparency;
  - Disclosure – Both the consultors and consultees need to be totally open with each other and not conceal or withhold information which might prevent dialogue;
  - Fair interpretation – There is a strict burden upon consultors to analyse and interpret consultation data objectively and present it in the same way; and

- Publication – It is critical that everyone who took part in the consultation gets to see what happened as a result. Ideally the consultees will recognise that their input is reflected in any publication and resultant outcome.

- 2.5 A range of partners and learners came together to provide a suite of resources to support the quality of the engagement and the Community Engagement Toolkit/Hub was created. The North Ayrshire Community Engagement Toolkit/hub aims to support and promote effective community engagement practice carried out across North Ayrshire by the Community Planning Partnership (CPP), the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP), and their respective Locality Partnerships and Locality Forums. The Community Engagement Network (CEN) is hosted by North Ayrshire Community Planning Partnership. It is the community engagement reference group for this toolkit/hub, support and development forum for the Engagement Champions and a networking opportunity for all partners involved in community engagement.
- 2.6 The purpose of the consultation, which took place between 5 March 2021 and 5 May 2021, was to gather the opinions of the local communities on the proposals around community hubs and the future roles of libraries, halls and community centres. The consultation was based on two previous engagements. In line with The Consultation Institute's best practice recommendations, a Stakeholder Reference Group was identified to represent key interests, and the methodology was agreed.
- 2.4 The mixed methodology was developed with the Stakeholder Reference Group and offered both online and telephone access to log views, as well as mailing alerts with Council Tax bills and adding information and links to electronic bills. The consultation process was conducted on the CONSUL platform, supported by CoSLA. In addition, there have been two press releases covered by local newspapers across North Ayrshire. A video was developed for use across social media. The Council also circulated information on social media. Alerts were sent to local contacts, users or members of the North Ayrshire Federation of Community Organisation (NAFCO), Community Facilities Service and Library Service. Elected Members were briefed in December 2020 and January 2021. Locality-based stakeholder discussion meetings were held by the Connected Communities Team, who also received email and petition submissions and provided the telephone call-back service, which enabled those without digital access to make their views known.
- 2.5 CONSUL is designed to be a tool used by government bodies to engage with citizens, it allows for citizens to propose ideas that can be reviewed and voted on by others. CONSUL is used in 35 countries, by 135 institutions and has approximately 90 million users. One of the key differences is that in many of the countries, citizens have a national identity number, which addresses the feedback about registration. North Ayrshire Council is one of the pilots in the use of the CONSUL platform for participatory democracy. The consultation questions were reviewed and amended by locality teams and the platform was tested, prior to the launch.
- 2.6 A question relating to the process was included in the consultation, with 140 (47%) saying it was easy to use and understand and 159 (53%) disagreeing. There were 77 responses relating to CONSUL. The key issues for the public were access and functionality. These were discussed during the consultation with the development team at CoSLA, who provide the national IT support for the platform. The public feedback included:

- Creating an account was seen as cumbersome;
- Some functionality issues were highlighted e.g. uncertainty if comments have been published, text size being too small, no spellcheck, inability to edit comments made in an earlier question and not having the ability to save comments separately;
- There are no guidelines for citizens on what happens to their comments and how to set up their username;
- Some people who wanted to comment on several locations struggled to navigate CONSUL and get back to the location list; and
- CONSUL is open and people can see all questions, which leads to a tendency for people to put answers in the wrong questions and/or repeat same comment in other questions.

2.7 As a result of a review of the feedback, the following advice will be sent to the development team at CoSLA:

- Review methods to view all new messages and interactions so that it is easier for participants to see these;
- Consider developing the ability to create an account/log in using Google/Facebook log in or via their Council online account;
- Advise of the need for clear signage on what to do with answer submission, more help text, “how to” guide for users, for example, clearly letting users know that their username will be made public if they submit comments;
- Explore the ability to increase text size for visually impaired and take into account those who may not know how to do this on their device;
- Consider developing integrated spell check functionality;
- Investigate a function for anonymous users to submit comments, either mediated or sent directly to the service running the consultation;
- Review the navigation to improve accessibility around the consultation, such as a sidebar with links to other pages relating to the current consultation; and
- Consider introducing the ability to make some questions mandatory or hide questions until a pre-requisite is completed, as this helps the respondent to navigate subsets of questions which ‘branch out’.

2.8 The Council has now been using CONSUL for a few years and supports CoSLA to review its usability and effectiveness. CoSLA is currently progressing work to link with My Account and use of artificial intelligence code to make access simpler. This is currently being piloted with Moray Council, with a view to being rolled out more widely. There is also a new post being filled within Cosla to support the development. Connected Communities will create a focus group to provide feedback on the pilot and to help further shape the development of its use in participatory democracy.

2.9 The feedback about other aspects of the consultation process related to:

- design and layout;
- supporting information; and
- timing, public awareness and participation via non-digital means (see 2.4).

2.10 As a result of the review of the feedback about other aspects of the consultation, the future consultation processes will be further strengthened by:

- Providing more information for potential participants on how to participate with clear and simple instructions on the consultation landing page on website.
- Including the data protection disclaimer on the landing page.
- Using graphs and infographics, as this makes information stand out more and is simpler and clearer for participants.
- Streamline the survey questions with more emphasis on quantitative data rather than qualitative to reduce the levels of duplication.

These changes will be implemented in future consultation stakeholder reference groups, training and updated on the Engagement Hub on the Community Planning Partnership website.

2.11 The Transformation Team, who analysed the public feedback, provided a report which was attached as Appendix 1 in the Council Paper of 9 June 2021. The Team also provided their own feedback on the consultation process related to design and functionality of CONSUL regarding data extraction, which will be discussed with the team at CoSLA.

### **3. Proposals**

3.1 That Council:

- a) Approves the recommendations for future consultations; and
- b) Authorises officers to implement the improvements.

### **4. Implications/Socio-economic Duty**

#### **Financial**

4.1 None

#### **Human Resources**

4.2 Connected Communities provide advice from the existing Connected Communities team for public engagement and consultation and will take the recommendations forward as outlined in 2.6 and 2.7.

#### **Legal**

4.3 None.

#### **Equality/Socio-economic**

4.4 Consultation is a fundamental element of open, transparent and democratic government. Fairness and equality are at the heart of community empowerment,

public engagement and consultation. The use of consultation mandates and support for stakeholder reference groups to ensure that methodologies and consultation wording are inclusive and wide-reaching will continue to be supported by Connected Communities.

## **Environmental and Sustainability**

4.5 None.

## **Key Priorities**

4.6 The proposal contained within the report supports the North Ayrshire Council Plan priorities:

- Active and strong communities;
- Inclusive, growing and enterprising local economy;
- People enjoy good life-long health and wellbeing; and
- Vibrant and welcoming places

## **Community Wealth Building**

4.7 Community Wealth Building is the economic context in which consultations are developed. The proposals contained within the report will provide opportunities which encourage democratic participation and personal growth, creating strong communities ready to make the most of community wealth building opportunities.

## **5. Consultation**

5.1 The proposals contained within this report has been developed by the through public feedback from the Review of Libraries, Halls and Community Centres and Development of Community Hubs consultation, including Elected Members, partners and key stakeholders. In addition, the Transformation Team, some Elected Members and NAFCO provided comments on specific aspects, addressed in 2.6 and 2.7.

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For further information please contact **Rhona Arthur, Head of Service, Connected Communities**, on **01294 324415**.

## **Background Papers**

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