



Listening Learning Leading

South Oxfordshire Public Engagement Charter 2016-2020

WORKING WITH YOU TO DELIVER EXCELLENT SERVICES

VERSION RECOMMENDED FOR ADOPTION, AUGUST 2016

Introduction

At South Oxfordshire District Council we are committed to delivering excellent services which meet or exceed the expectations of the people we serve.

To make sure this happens, we will speak to residents, businesses and voluntary and community groups to find out what people want from us, reflect on how we can do things better, and support communities who want to help themselves.

Our Public Engagement Charter sets out some principles we will use to guide this work.



Why?

By speaking to residents, businesses and community and voluntary groups in the district, we are able to understand and respond to the needs and views of the people we serve.

That's why our corporate plan¹ says we will:

engage with residents and service users to ensure that services and facilities meet their needs, and;

support communities to help themselves.

These commitments are in addition to our legal duties to consult people when making changes to the delivery of services², requirements to invite comments on the development of planning policies³ and obligations to support groups who want to use community rights introduced as part of the localism agenda⁴.

To meet these corporate and legislative commitments, we will undertake three types of engagement activity as shown in Figure 1.

¹ South Oxfordshire District Council Corporate Plan 2016-2020

² Section 3 (2) of the Local Government Act 1999

³ Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 (as amended).

⁴ Neighbourhood Plans, Right to Build, Right to Challenge and the Right to Bid were introduced as part of the Localism Act 2011. See: <http://mycommunityrights.org.uk>

Figure 1: Types of public engagement activity supported by the council⁵



When?

We want members of the public to know that when they engage with the council, their needs and views will be carefully considered and acted upon. To make sure this happens, we will speak to people early enough for their comments to influence our plans. We will not undertake public engagement activities for the sake of it, and not ask for people's views on outcomes that have been predetermined (or where there are already very clear reasons for pursuing a particular course of action).

⁵ Consultation on planning applications is not covered by this policy. Procedures for responding to planning applications are described in the council's Statement of Community Involvement, available from: <http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/services-and-advice/planning-and-building/planning-policy/our-development-plan/community-involvement>

We will give people enough time to engage with us. When we conduct formal consultations they will run for at least four weeks.⁶ These consultations will avoid holiday and election periods.

How?

We will use a range of methods to engage our customers as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Ways we will engage people



Although the ways we engage people will vary, there are a number of principles that will always apply. These are listed below.

⁶ Some statutory consultations require a longer timeframe.

PRINCIPLES

1. Making use of existing information

Before speaking to people, we will check to see if we already have information that we can use. This may include the results of previous consultations and evidence provided to us by communities such as published Neighbourhood or Community Led Plans. We will not repeat the same conversations with people unless there is good reason to do so.

2. Proportionality

We will make sure that the type and scale of engagement activity is proportionate to the task in hand, as well as the potential impact on residents, businesses and community and voluntary organisations. If something is particularly important or controversial we will consider using a combination of methods to speak to a wide range of people. For more procedural or minor issues, we will adopt a light touch approach.

3. Making engagement meaningful and relevant

We appreciate it takes time and energy for people to engage with the council. People are also more likely to speak to us about issues that are important to them. When planning any engagement exercise, we will make it meaningful and relevant for people by trying to see things from their perspective and asking questions that matter to them.

4. Clearly communicating the scope and purpose of engagement

We will be upfront about the purpose and scope of our engagement and use plain English. We think it's important that people know where they stand and how much scope for influence they have over the work of the council. When formal consultations are undertaken, we will publicise information in advance detailing what is up for discussion, why, when and how to make responses.

5. Representation and inclusivity

We have a legal duty to understand how our services impact on different groups of people⁷. To make sure this happens, we will plan engagement activities to target members of the public who are likely to be particularly affected by any service changes. This will include our choice of engagement method and style of communication, as well as monitoring participation of different demographic groups.

6. Community and voluntary sector involvement

As a signatory to the Oxfordshire COMPACT⁸, we recognise the value of local community and voluntary sector organisations. Their advocacy for particular groups and ability to provide

⁷ Equality Act 2010

⁸ The Oxfordshire COMPACT is an agreement between public authorities and community, voluntary and faith organisations across the county. It sets out guidelines and principles governing how the sectors have agreed to work together. See: <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/oxfordshire-compact>

hands-on support for communities often adds value to the work of the council. Wherever possible, we will work with these organisations when engaging members of the public; particularly where they have experience of working with groups whose views we need to consider.

7. Councillor involvement

Our councillors advocate on behalf of local communities and provide political leadership for the council. We will encourage councillors to get involved in public engagement activities where appropriate.

8. Confidentiality

When undertaking formal consultations, we will always protect the personal details of respondents in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. This means we will only ask for personal data when it is necessary, clearly explain how it will be used and not pass it onto third parties without seeking prior permission.

9. Transparency and feedback

After any significant engagement exercise, we will publish information about it on our website. This will detail what happened, what people told us and any decisions the council has made in response. Where we have not been able to act on the needs or views of those who got involved, this will be explained.

Further information

[South Oxfordshire District Council Statement of Community Involvement](#)

[Cabinet Office \(2016\) Consultation Principles](#)

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