

Consultation Strategy 2009 to 2012
(Approved by Strategy & Resources Board Spring 2009)

Introduction

All local authorities have a statutory duty to consult and involve residents in decision-making. However we would like to do much more than just our statutory requirements. We would like all of Oxford's residents and our employees to have the opportunity to get involved in developing, prioritising and monitoring our services. We will provide sufficient ways for our residents and staff to get involved and provide the necessary support to encourage involvement.

This strategy's target audience includes the residents of Oxford particularly those that are interested in getting involved with consultation, council employees, members, partnership organisations and local groups or organisations.

This strategy runs from 2009 to 2012.

National policy

The government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' signalled a significant change of direction for Local Government with a heavy emphasis on increased public engagement and participation. Local authorities were encouraged to involve citizens in the development of services and inform residents about the services available.

"Councils must show that they are ready to make a fundamental change in attitudes and culture, engaging with citizens and working with their partners in new ways."

The 'duty to involve' was introduced in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act in 2007. The duty requires Local Authorities to take steps to involve representative sections of people in their functions by providing information.

On 10th July 2008 the Government issued its White Paper 'Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power'. This builds on the duty to involve and is aimed at driving power to local communities.

With the focus being on citizen engagement, it is vital that we have a strategy to outline our approach to delivering the engagement agenda.

Local context

We need to explore ways of improving how we engage with our residents at a local level. To assist with this we must provide sufficient support, training and funding for local engagement.

Oxford City Council have signed up to the Oxfordshire Local Area Agreement (LAA). Targets have been agreed with partners on local priorities, selected from national indicators that include measures of citizen satisfaction and perceptions.

The Place Survey will also help us monitor targets concerning citizens' satisfaction.

The Councils' Corporate Plan outlines 6 key priorities.

- More housing, better housing for all
- Tackle inequalities and support communities
- Improve the local environment, economy and quality of life
- Reduce crime and anti-social behaviour
- Tackle climate change and promote sustainable environmental resource management
- Transform Oxford City Council by improving value for money and service performance.

This strategy will play a key role in supporting the delivery of each of these.

Our Aim

Our aim is to ensure consultations are clear, inclusive and representative and that the results are used in service planning and to shape our priorities.

Our Consultation Principles

1. **Inclusiveness:** the participation of all stakeholders who have an interest in or who would be affected by a specific decision, including groups that are sometimes difficult to engage such as young people, minority groups, and people with disabilities.
2. **Transparency and Clarity:** ensuring that all stakeholders are given the information they need, told what they can or cannot influence by responding to engagement and what the next steps will be.
3. **Commitment:** giving consultation sufficient priority and resources and demonstrating that it is a genuine attempt to understand and incorporate other opinions even when they conflict with the existing point of view.
4. **Accessibility:** providing different ways for people to be engaged and ensuring that people are not excluded through barriers of language, culture or opportunity.
5. **Accountability:** after the engagement process ensure participants receive feedback of how and why their contributions have or have not influenced the outcome. Also ensure that there are routes for follow-up including reporting on final decisions and/or implementation plans.
6. **Responsiveness:** those doing the consulting must be open to the idea that their existing plans may need to be changed, improved or even deleted. For those being consulted they must believe that their voice will be taken seriously, and that things can be changed if there is support for change.
7. **Willingness to Learn:** encouraging both those carrying out the consultation and the participants to learn from each other. This means a style of process that is as interactive and as incremental as possible to build increasing layers of mutual understanding and respect.

8. Productivity: establishing from the outset how the engagement process will make something better.

Our Objectives

1. Ensure a clear understanding of and commitment to effective consultation
2. Adopt a co-ordinated, strategic approach to consultation which avoids duplication
3. Ensure local communities are involved in identifying local needs and consultation is both inclusive and representative
4. Monitor the results and impacts of consultation exercises
5. Feed back the results of consultation to consultees
6. Keep consultees and the wider community informed of any changes that occur from consultation exercises and ensure consultation is used to aid decision-making wherever possible
7. Empower stakeholders to gain a voice within the decision-making processes and to play a key role in the strategic planning of services.
8. Extend the range of electronic consultation methodologies available.
9. Seek opportunities to work in partnership with other organisations.

How will we meet our objectives?

1. Ensure a clear understanding of and commitment to effective consultation
 - By ensuring consultation is an integral part of the service planning process.
 - By ensuring consultation exercises have a reasonable budget attached to them.
 - By providing feedback to people involved in consultation exercises and keeping them informed about how the results of consultation have impacted on decisions made.
2. Adopt a co-ordinated, strategic approach to consultation which avoids duplication
 - By co-ordinating consultation exercises across the Council with members of the Consultation Group. As a representative from each service area sits on this group, we can monitor and co-ordinate consultations quite easily.
 - By recording all consultations on the e-consult online consultation system.

- The e-consult online consultation system holds an annual calendar of all consultation activity, which will also help with co-ordination.
 - By running corporate consultation exercises such as the Talkback Panel which ensure we have a representative sample of residents at all time that we can contact to test ideas/proposals and get feedback on service delivery.
3. Ensure local communities are involved in identifying local needs and consultation is both inclusive and representative
- By using a variety of consultation methods that are appropriate for the audience. This includes:
 - Using written materials in different languages.
 - Presenting material verbally as opposed to through written form for those with difficulty reading or where English may not be their first language.
 - Using the e-consult system for those who would prefer to get involved in an informal way.
 - Holding consultation exercises at the most appropriate times and days e.g. after 3.30 is unlikely to suit parents with childcare responsibilities.
 - Ensure all venues for consultation meetings are fully accessible and provide appropriate facilities (i.e. induction loops, language facilities etc).
 - Ensure transport and other expenses are covered where necessary.
 - By ensuring consultations are representative of all key stakeholders. It is good practice to ensure consultation exercises are representative of the city, however if your consultation targets a specific group e.g. people in wheelchairs then a representative sample of wheelchair users rather than the city as a whole would be more appropriate.
 - By providing support and guidance on consulting with different communities. Written information should be made available in appropriate languages. Liaison will also take place through relevant voluntary and community organisations and leaders. The consultation toolkit will also provide further information on this.
4. Monitor the results of consultation exercises
- The annual consultation plan 2009/10 (Appendix A) and plans for subsequent years will be monitored by the Consultation Officers group at

bi-monthly meetings to ensure it is being delivered effectively and the results are being used where they can in service areas.

5. Feed back the results of consultation to consultees.
 - Ensuring the findings from consultation exercises are fed back to those involved and the wider community.
 - Feedback should be provided using the most appropriate method for your audience, some examples include newsletters, presentations, updates on our website, feeding back at meetings such as specific interest group meetings and via 'Your Oxford.'
 - All the results from consultations will be listed on the e-consult system and available to all that access the system.
6. Keep consultees and the wider community informed of any changes that occur from consultation exercises and ensure consultation is used to aid decision-making wherever possible.
 - Disseminating the findings of consultation to aid decision-making.
 - Providing regular feedback to the community on where and how consultation has influenced service delivery and future plans.
 - Ensure there is an annual newsletter highlighting all the changes that have taken place as a result of the findings from Talkback surveys.
 - Ensure details of how all consultation results have been used are stored on the e-consult system.
7. Empower stakeholders to gain a voice within the decision-making processes and to play a key role in the strategic planning of services.
 - Create a database of all key stakeholders in the city to send e-bulletins and updates to. This will ensure they are kept informed of and engaged with developments at the Council.
 - Offer training to stakeholders. This will involve discussions with stakeholders to assess their needs and provide training accordingly.
 - We have 3 online discussion forum; the first in Central, South & West of the city, the second in Headington and Marston and the third in Cowley. The forums are led by members of the community, which helps to empower local residents and their communities.
8. Seek opportunities to work in partnership with other organisations.
 - The partners that we will work with include Oxfordshire County Council, the District Councils in Oxfordshire, Primary Care Trust, Police, Trade Unions, Local Businesses, other public service providers, Local Strategic Partnership and Parish Councils.

- We already have partnership links with many organisations, which we can use for joint training and workshops. We will work hard to develop these links further.
- The countywide consultation officers groups includes members from each of the District Councils and the County Council and meets on a bi-monthly basis to provide updates on consultations across the county and explore opportunities for joint working.

The way we consult

There are a variety of methods that we use. These include:

- Citizens Panel, Talkback, which is made up of 1,000 residents from across the city. The panel are representative of the city's population and refreshed every two years. Panel members receive quarterly surveys on topics ranging from the quality of service provision to views on crime and anti-social behaviour.
- Use of the media (this includes internal forms such as Accents, Weekly Management Matters and the intranet and external such as the website and Your Oxford)
- E-consult is our online consultation system through which we can conduct online consultations such as surveys, notices of upcoming events, forums etc
- Questionnaires and Surveys
- With partnership organisations (Oxfordshire County Council, District Councils in Oxfordshire, Police, Primary Care Trust and the Local Strategic Partnership).
- Focus Groups
- Citizens Juries
- Public/open meetings
- Newsletters such as Talkback Updates, Tenants News, and Your Oxford
- Online discussion forums

The Way Forward

Corporate Co-ordination

There will be direction and mapping of consultation from the centre. By doing this we will be able to identify agreed priorities and information sharing between departments.

All consultation exercises must be approved by the Consultation Officer before they take place, this will help to avoid duplication and help with co-ordination of consultation activities across the Council.

This will make the consultation process more efficient and by doing this we will also be able to demonstrate value for money with all consultation exercises.

Consultation Toolkit

There is a tendency to assume that consultation skills are easily acquired, which can lead to inappropriate methods being selected for consultation.

To prevent this a consultation toolkit has been developed which will help with selecting and planning the most appropriate consultation methods.

The toolkit should be used as a reference guide and more detailed support provided by the Consultation Officer.

The Role of Members

The representational and scrutiny role of members is vital to the consultation process. In their role as community leaders, members play a key role in consultation as they have a unique relationship with residents and can provide us with valuable feedback from their involvement with local groups, partnerships and organisations.

They are usually active members of local community initiatives and sometimes the instigators of consultation initiatives.

Further Information

There is extensive information available that can guide consultation exercises. Oxfordshire Data Observatory (www.oxfordshireobservatory.info) can provide statistics on the local population, economy and environment.

To get further information about consultation at Oxford City Council please go to our website at www.oxford.gov.uk/consultation.

Appendix A

Consultation Plan 2009/10