

To: City Executive Board

Date: 3rd March 2010

Item No:

Report of: Head of Policy, Culture & Communications

Title of Report: CONSULTATION FRAMEWORK

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present the proposed Consultation Framework for 2010-2013

Key decision: No

Executive lead member: Cllr Bob Price

Report approved by:

Finance: Penny Gardner

Legal: Jeremy Thomas

Policy Framework:

Recommendation(s): To approve the Consultation Framework as a draft Policy Framework document for consultation in accordance with the requirements of the Council's Constitution

1. This report outlines the draft Consultation Framework for 2010-2013. The Consultation Framework consists of a Consultation Strategy, Consultation Toolkit and Action Plan. The Consultation Framework is to be part of the Council's Policy Framework.

2. Background

The Local Democracy, Economic development and Construction Act 2009 creates a new duty for local authorities in England and Wales to promote the opportunities for citizen involvement in a variety of local institutions.

This new legislation aims to provide local authorities with the necessary powers and freedom to engage with and meet the needs of their local community effectively. 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

IpsosMori's 2009 report 'People, Perceptions and Place' identifies Oxford as "having a combination of background characteristics that will make it hard to score highly on perceptions measures." They identified an 'Area Challenge Index' that includes high population churn, high number of young people and high number of households with over occupancy. According to 'Area Challenge Index', **Oxford is the most challenged District in the Country.**

In light of the statutory duties, it is essential for us to adopt a coherent and systematic approach to consultation. Our approach needs to ensure the voices of all sections of the community can be heard. We also need to ensure our approach offers value for money and delivers an effective consultation system.

3. The Consultation Strategy outlines our consultations principles, objectives and how we aim to deliver our objectives.
4. The Consultation Toolkit is a manual for staff, providing them with guidance on how to carry out consultation and how to select the best consultation methods. This manual will be updated regularly to ensure all information within it, such as contact details, remain current and up-to-date.
5. **Level of risk**

A risk assessment has been undertaken and the risk register is attached at Appendix C. All risks have been mitigated to an acceptable level.

The risk of not having a Consultation Framework in place is that the organisation will have a consultation programme that is uncoordinated, consultations may be duplicated, the consultations may not reach their target audiences and there will be little consistency on the methods we select for different consultations and for how we provide feedback on consultation.

6. **Climate change / environmental impact**

The framework encourages a reduction in the amount of paper used by promoting online consultations wherever possible. In order to be inclusive consultation must be available in a variety of formats but where possible online methods are encouraged.

7. Equalities impact

The aim of all consultations is that they involve a representative sample of people. The toolkit explains the importance of consultations being inclusive and how to select samples for consultation that reach a broad range of consultees.

8. Financial Implications

Nil - within existing budgets. The ability to carry out more consultations online will lead to less surveys being printed on paper leading to a reduction in consultation costs.

9. Legal Implications.

Nil

10. Recommendation

To approve the Consultation Framework as a draft Policy Framework document for consultation in accordance with the requirements of the Council's Constitution.

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Consultation Strategy 2010-13

1. 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.

2. National policy

The Local Democracy, Economic development and Construction Act 2009 creates a new duty for local authorities in England and Wales to promote the opportunities for citizen involvement in a variety of local institutions.

Its primary aims are to empower and enable local people to shape local services and communities, and to help businesses and communities through the current economic climate by supporting regions and local areas in taking action at every level to boost jobs and skills, support businesses.

This new legislation aims to provide local authorities with the necessary powers and freedom to engage with and meet the needs of their local community effectively. Consultation and information provision should be a priority and embedded as standard practice through all levels of local authority central to service delivery, policy and decision making.

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.

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

3. 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 has 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
- Stronger and more inclusive communities
- Improve the local environment, economy and quality of life
- Reduce crime and anti-social behaviour
- Tackle climate change and promote 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.

4. Defining 'community'

There are a whole range of 'communities of interest', or groups who share something in common. Each has its own expectations about how the council should engage with them and on what issues. Common communities of interest include: residents, special interest groups, voluntary and community organisations, partner organisations and local businesses

Other communities of interest are around age, ethnicity or disability, and their common characteristics mean that these groups need to be engaged in different ways from the communities listed above. Sometimes the 'community' in question is specific to service teams (eg. Planning applicants), while others (e.g. businesses) are common to a number of teams.

5. 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.

6. Our Consultation Principles

- **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.

- **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.
- **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.
- **Accessibility:** providing different ways for people to be engaged and ensuring that people are not excluded through barriers of language, culture or opportunity.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **Productivity:** establishing from the outset how the engagement process will make something better.

7. Our Objectives

- a) Ensure a clear understanding of and commitment to effective consultation
- b) Adopt a co-ordinated, strategic approach to consultation which avoids duplication
- c) Ensure local communities are involved in identifying local needs and consultation is both inclusive and representative. This involves understanding the range of ways in which to engage with different communities across the district.
- d) Monitor the results and impacts of consultation exercises
- e) Feed back the results of consultation to consultees

- f) 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
- g) Empower stakeholders to gain a voice within the decision-making processes and to play a key role in the strategic planning of services.
- h) Extend the range of online consultation methodologies available.
- i) Seek opportunities to work in partnership with other organisations.
- j) Equip staff with the skills and tools they need to be able to make a judgement about when, how and at what level it is appropriate to engage on any particular issue.

8. How will we meet our objectives?

- a) 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.
- b) 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. A copy of the 2010/2011 consultation plan is at Appendix A
 - 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.

- c) Ensure local communities are involved in identifying local needs and consultation is both inclusive and representative
- By working with Area Committees who work in partnership with residents, the Police and NHS representative to drive projects and make decisions across Oxford. Area Committees have a dedicated Area Coordinator to ensure that decisions and projects are put into action.
 - 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 online. Via our website we can carry out online surveys and run discussion forums which are useful tools for those that want to get involved in consultation using informal methods of involvement.
 - 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 (Appendix B) will also provide further information on this.

- d) Monitor the results of consultation exercises
- Plans for upcoming consultations can all be found at www.oxford.gov.uk/consultation. Consultation plans will be monitored by the Consultation Officers group at bi-monthly meetings to ensure they are being delivered effectively and the results are being used where they can in Service Areas.
- e) 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.
- f) 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.
- g) 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 forums; 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.

h) Extend the range of online consultation methodologies available.

- We have an online consultation tool on our website that lets us run surveys online, host discussion forums and store all information related to consultation. All the results from consultations can be stored here making it easier for people trying to access data about particular consultations. Details of past, present and future consultations are also stored here.
- Introduce 'social media' into consultation projects where appropriate. Social media incorporates the online technology and methods through which people can share content, personal opinions and swap different perspectives. Probably the most popular outlets of social media are Facebook and Twitter. Any consultation or views that are received via social media websites must be recorded on the consultation section of the Council's website as social media websites do not replace the need to ensure our own City Council website has an up to date record of all actions associated with any consultation.
- We are currently looking to introduce an ePetitions element on our website in line with central Government requirements. This will give residents of the city opportunities to set up petitions that will highlight issues of concern for residents or areas where change is required.
- We have a range of online forms available on our website which makes it easier for people to apply for services and report issues.

i) 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.
- j) Equip staff with the skills and tools they need to carry out consultation
- A Consultation Toolkit has been produced to help staff in the planning of their consultation. This explains the different consultation methods that are available and helps users of the manual decide when different methods should be selected.

9. 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 run online surveys, promote upcoming events, run discussions forums and store information about all consultations that we are managing.
- Questionnaires and Surveys in both online and postal format.
- With partnership organisations (Oxfordshire County Council, District Councils in Oxfordshire, Police, Primary Care Trust and the Local Strategic Partnership).
- Focus Groups. These are a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their attitude towards a product, service or concept. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members.
- Citizens Juries. These are a decision-making or decision-advising tool modelled on the idea of a criminal jury. They are used to involve members of the public in a structured

way about an issue of local or national concern and can be used to make or inform decisions about strategic planning or service prioritisation.

- Public/open meetings
- Newsletters such as Talkback Updates, Tenants News and Your Oxford
- Online discussion forums. These are online discussions on websites where people participating discuss a range of topics and members may cultivate interest groups.

10. 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.

11. 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 (Appendix B) 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.

12. 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.