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## 1. Executive Summary

This policy statement describes how Oxford City Council engages its communities in decision-making. It builds on and supersedes the Consultation Strategy 2010-13 and takes account of the significant developments that have occurred in neighbourhood and partnership working in recent times. It develops the “Engaging Our Communities” themes already set out in the Council’s Corporate Plan 2014-18, and while the Corporate Plan describes what we intend to do in support of this priority, the Community Engagement Policy Statement sets out the framework for how we will do it.

## 2. Purpose of this policy statement

The purpose of this new three-year Community Engagement Policy Statement is to provide a framework for how the Council engages with its residents and communities to develop a greater understanding of their needs, and to increase the level and quality of involvement in the decisions that affect their lives.

This policy statement aims to clarify:

- how demographic changes in Oxford impact on our approach to community engagement
- the principles underpinning the Council’s community engagement activities
- the different activities involved in community engagement and the purposes of these activities
- progress that has been made so far in different areas of community engagement and our plans for the future.

## 3. Introduction

Oxford City Council is committed to building a world-class city for all its citizens. Working with our communities to build channels for dialogue and engagement is a key part of the Council’s plan to enhance the relationship between citizens, their local communities and those who they elect to represent them.

The Council believes that building stronger communities and supporting community engagement in decision-making are mutually supportive, and that stronger communities and engaged citizens will participate more with the City’s decision-making processes.

In October 2013 the Cabinet Office issued guidance on Consultation Principles<sup>1</sup>, which sets out the principles that public bodies should adopt when attempting to engage stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/255180/Consultation-Principles-Oct-2013.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/255180/Consultation-Principles-Oct-2013.pdf) downloaded 1 May 2014.

The guidance proposes a proportionate and targeted approach, so that the type and scale of engagement is proportionate to the potential impacts of the proposal under consideration, and the ability to shape them. These principles are reflected in the City Council's long-standing approach to community engagement and are reflected in this policy statement.

## 4. Background

Oxford City Council has a long and successful track record of working with local people to build strong and active communities - community engagement is at the heart of how the Council does business. Examples include: working in the 1990s to regenerate east Oxford; engaging with the Prince's Foundation and the people of Blackbird Leys to improve the quality of life there; working with local people to remodel play areas across the city and engaging local people in Rose Hill to develop a new community centre; and working with Cowley Road Works to revive the popular Cowley Road Carnival.

The City Council engages with its residents and communities in a wide range of different ways. These include:

- Engagement through ward councillors. Oxford City Council is led by its elected members - they set the Council's policy and strategic direction. Oxford's 48 city councillors also provide a direct link between local residents and the City Council's decision-making mechanisms. One of their most important roles is explaining the community to the council by being the voice for local people
- The Customer Contact Strategy sets out how our customers can be involved in shaping and improving our front-line services. We want to know what is important to them in their contact with us and to understand how they wish to access services
- The Statement of Community Involvement describes how residents are involved in planning decisions at the city-wide and very local level. The Planning department is improving its consultation process. We want all planning development in our city to be of the highest quality. We also want to expand the scope and effectiveness of our consultation arrangements and to put collaboration at the heart of our planning processes. Improvements include allowing more time between project inception and commencement dates as a way of improving consultation with all interested parties
- Engagement with tenants and leaseholders. Tenants and leaseholders co-exist in areas of mixed tenure and solving problems and driving new initiatives must involve all relevant groups. The City Council's model of engagement has been developed with the national Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) and involves:
  - creating a structure which enables tenants and leaseholders to be involved in ways that suit their needs
  - developing training and support opportunities
  - ensuring transparency so that tenants and leaseholders are able to see the difference that their engagement has made
- The opportunity to comment on all policy and strategy documents, including the Corporate Plan and Annual Budget that are produced by Oxford City Council.

This Community Engagement Policy Statement focuses on ways that local people can further contribute to decision-making in their local communities. Flexibility, a desire to find

the most appropriate approach to each issue or community group, underpins the approaches to engagement set out above. Flexibility also plays a key role in our approach to community engagement.

## 5. Understanding our communities

Oxford's annual population churn of 25%, around 5,000 houses of multiple occupation, and a culturally diverse population present challenges in terms of sustained and effective community engagement. A thorough understanding of the city's demographics – city-wide and at ward and neighbourhood level – lies at the heart of our approach.

Oxford appears to be a thriving city with many opportunities for work and leisure and, for many residents, this is the daily reality of their lives. However, there are major inequalities in life chances and life expectancy in our city.

The Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010 ranks Oxford 131st out of 354, placing it in the top half most deprived local authority areas in England. Of 85 areas in Oxford, 12 are among the 20% most deprived areas in England. These areas, in the south and east of the city, experience multiple levels of deprivation - low skills, low incomes and relatively high levels of crime; the majority of the Council's 7,800 tenants live in these areas. Men and women from the more deprived areas can expect to live six years less than those in the more affluent areas. While 43% of Oxford residents have degree-level qualifications or above 14% have no qualifications at all.

In terms of ethnicity, Oxford has a diverse population. In 2011, 22% of the population were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds, compared to an England average of 13%. An additional 14% of residents were of white but non-British backgrounds. The largest non-white ethnic groups represented are Pakistani, Indian, Black African, 'other Asian' and Chinese ethnic groups. The child population is considerably more ethnically diverse than the older population and as a result the population is expected to become more ethnically diverse in the future.

In 2011, 16% of Oxford residents said their main language was not English; this is twice the national average. After English, the most common main languages were Polish and Chinese languages, followed by French, Portuguese and Spanish. South Asian languages - Urdu, Bengali and Panjabi – also made up a large proportion.

A significant proportion of the population is youthful. This is in part because of the student population; 24% of the city's adult population are students compared to an England average of 6%. Overall, 32% of the city's population are aged between 18 and 29 compared to an England average of 16%.

Oxford's high house prices make it one of the least affordable places in the country. The percentage of households who own their home is relatively low in Oxford - 47% compared to 63% in England. The percentage of households renting their home in the private sector is high - 28% in Oxford compared with 17% in England. Over the last decade the number of

households renting their home in the private sector rose by almost 50%, from nearly 11,000 households in 2001 to nearly 16,000 households in 2011. One in five Oxford residents lives in a house of multiple occupation. More than 6,000 people are on our waiting list for social housing.

## **6. Our principles of community engagement**

The principles underpinning our approach to community engagement derive directly from the city's demographics.

Oxford is an extremely diverse city where multiple and changing concepts of community overlap. There are communities of place - people living in geographically distinct areas of the city; communities of identity - people from black and ethnic minority groups, older people, younger people, people with disabilities, religious groups, and gay and lesbian groups; and communities of interest –such as students, business and academic visitors, council tenants, allotment holders, cyclists, and theatre-goers, or people who come together to use services such as parks, roads, community buildings or transport.

In the light of this high level of diversity, the need to maintain and strengthen community cohesion, and the desire to engage people in decisions that impact on them, the City Council has adopted a strategy that operates at two levels.

As an overarching principle, the City Council believes that services must be delivered within a framework of standards where people have access to high quality services regardless of where they live. This means that the majority of services should be designed, delivered and reviewed on a city-wide basis. Services will, of course, reflect the different needs of areas across the city and resource allocation will vary accordingly. However, these variations should be seen in the context of the Council's vision for the whole city, which is set out in the Corporate Plan and the budget approved by Council.

Community engagement is about ensuring that elected councillors are aware of and engaged with the views of individuals, community groups, and other stakeholders. It is not intended to enable minority interests to overrule the best interests of the wider community and the city as a whole. Community engagement supports, informs and improves decision-making by elected councillors, but it does not replace it; the responsibility for the final decision on any issue that involves the Council's resources rests with the city's elected councillors.

However, within this framework of standards, arrangements for community engagement must be sufficiently flexible to enable people to engage in ways that suit them. In this regard, one size will definitely not fit all.

Within this context our principles of community engagement are:

1. Flexibility
2. Proportionality
3. Transparency and clarity

4. Timeliness
5. Feedback
6. Inclusiveness and accessibility

Our approach to community engagement contributes directly to the City Council's ambition to build a world class city for all its citizens. Many Oxford residents are highly articulate and very skilled at getting their points of view heard and their voices are always welcome. However, in areas of deprivation where challenges are greatest, the capacity for community involvement is often lower. Oxford City Council wants to open up more opportunities for engagement with people living in the more deprived areas of the city whose voices otherwise might not so easily be heard.

## 7. Flexibility

Successful engagement requires a range of mechanisms to build and sustain a conversation with the community, with a broad or narrow audience as the issue requires. Broad principles and general ideas could be consulted on across a wide audience while the details of implementation might require input from a much smaller group

This flexible approach to community engagement means that lessons can be learned and acted on quickly. For some people, public meetings are a popular method of community engagement, but for others it is either not appealing or impractical. For example, a recent consultation about tower block refurbishment was scheduled to be carried out at a meeting at local community centre. Turnout at the meeting was poor so officers carried out intensive door-knocking to gather feedback. A subsequent successful engagement activity took place in the tower block lobby.

The diverse and overlapping communities in the city have been referred to earlier in this report. People often see themselves as belonging to one community of place and one or more communities of interest, and this means that the City Council must provide appropriate methods of engagement. For example:

- communities of place could be engaged through Area Forums, Neighbourhood Forums or Community Partnerships
- communities of identity could be engaged through the work of the community development team and other officers and members given special responsibility for managing these relations
- communities of interest could be engaged through the delivery of services that they best relate to, such as sports and leisure, culture, or housing.

Effective engagement means identifying the kinds of audience that need to be involved at each stage of the process on any given issue. This requires a good understanding of the networks of interest and expertise in the area. Some examples of the range of engagement forums are described below.

### Area Forums

Area forums are informal meetings held across six geographical areas of the city, providing an opportunity for local people to discuss priority issues for the community and agree actions with other residents, councillors, city council teams and other partners.

Area Forums are sponsored and supported by the Council, and are free to adapt arrangements to best meet their own needs. The purpose of Area Forums is to:

- identify key issues and priorities to feed into city-wide service and budget planning processes
- enable local councillors to play a central role in drawing up community plans, which provides an opportunity to link up service-planning more closely with local needs and aspirations

- provide a space in which residents and community groups can work with mainstream service providers – health, education, police, businesses and the voluntary sectors – to ensure that local services are responsive to community needs
- comment on policy documents and proposals that affect the area
- enable local issues and interests to be discussed with local members.

Oxford City Council is:

- providing each Councillor with an annual budget of £1,500 for small projects that link to the priorities emerging from forum discussions and other local consultations
- exploring ways to ensure that all of our communities, including the more ‘hidden’ groups, have the opportunity to engage with them
- providing an Area Support Officer to arrange and publicise meetings, and Senior Management support for each Area Forum.

### Community Partnerships

Community Partnerships have been established in those areas of the city which have been identified as being in greatest need: Barton, The Leys, Rose Hill, Wood Farm, Northway, Cutteslowe and Littlemore. They are not decision-making bodies but provide a focus for local action and engagement on local issues.

A neighbourhood management approach is being implemented in these areas to develop a stronger sense of community. It involves residents working in partnership with mainstream service providers, the local authority, councillors, businesses and the voluntary and community sectors to address local priorities and make local services more responsive to the needs of their area.

It is a process which recognises the uniqueness of each place; allowing the people that live, work or provide services in it to build on its strengths and address its specific challenges.

Community plans are being developed in these areas so that there is co-ordinated action to address local issues and services can respond more effectively to local needs.

Oxford City Council is:

- Providing a Neighbourhood Locality Officer who supports and develops the partnership approach and co-ordinates bi-monthly or quarterly meetings and sub-groups to work on specific topic areas e.g. young people, housing and environment.
- Providing Community Development Officer support to engage with residents and develop local projects and support capacity building.
- Grant funding to Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA) to support greater involvement of the voluntary sector within the partnerships
- Senior Management support for each partnership



These resources will primarily be focused on tackling the issues identified in the community plan.

### **Neighbourhood Forums**

The Localism Act has introduced new rights and powers for communities and individuals to enable them to get directly involved in spatial planning for their areas. Neighbourhood planning will allow communities to come together through a neighbourhood forum to produce a neighbourhood plan.

Neighbourhood plans are about allocating land for development and being able to say where new houses, businesses, shops and so on should go and what they should look like. Once plans are adopted they will become an important consideration when making decisions on planning applications.

Three local groups have asked Oxford City Council to formally designate their proposed neighbourhood areas. Designating a neighbourhood area is the first step towards producing a neighbourhood plan. The proposed neighbourhood areas are:

- Wolvercote
- Jericho
- Summertown and St Margaret's

The details of the neighbourhood area applications and comments received will be considered at a meeting of the City Executive Board, where the final decision on whether to designate each of the proposed neighbourhood areas will be made.

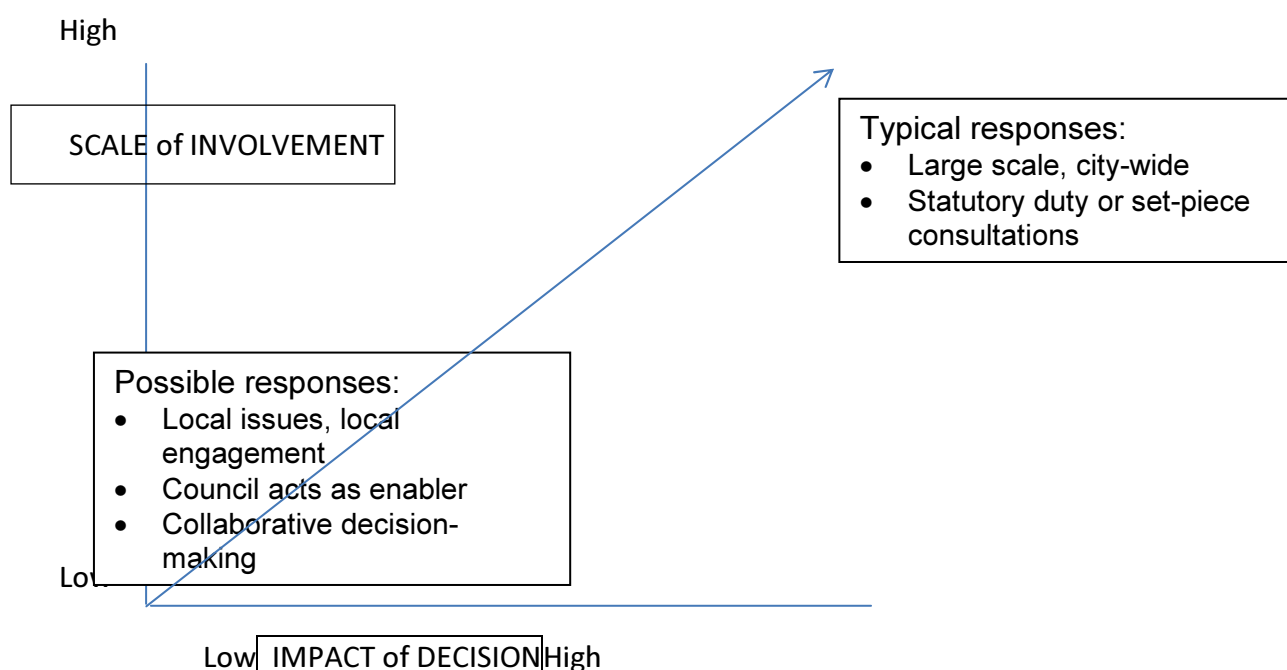
### **The Oxford Student Community Partnership Group**

An example of a community of interest is the university student population of Oxford who run the Oxford Student Community Partnership Group. This meets twice a term and is attended by representatives from both universities, along with all Councillors and Oxford City Council officers. Topics of interest for this community include waste and recycling, voter registration and housing.

## 8. Proportionality

Oxford City Council applies the principle of proportionality when deciding which method of community engagement to use in any particular situation. This means that the type and scale of involvement will be proportional to both the potential impact of the proposal or decision being taken, and the ability to shape them.

The model below shows how the type of engagement varies according to the scale of impact, the role of the council and the nature and scale of the communities impacted by the issue. Adequate focus must be placed on the effective use of City Council resources as well as consideration for the resource commitment of community.



## 9. Transparency and clarity

Oxford City Council applies the principle of transparency and clarity to its engagement processes. This means that the objectives of the community engagement activity must be clear since they vary according to type of issue and the stage in the decision-making or policy development process that has been reached. This means that consultation on policy is less useful when councillors have clear priorities that they intend to pursue.

The boundaries of the decision must be defined -it should be clear which aspects are being consulted upon, and where decisions have already been made. To avoid creating unrealistic expectations, stakeholders and citizens must be told what they can or cannot influence by responding to engagement, and what the next steps will be.

Sufficient information should be available to enable stakeholders and residents to make informed comments. This will be provided both on a case-by-case basis through the provision of information related to specific consultations and engagement events and activities, and as part of Oxford City Council's on-going commitment to provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist the understanding of issues.

The residents of Oxford receive information through a variety of media channels, as shown in the table below. These are all overseen by the City Council's Communication team. There is evidence that suggests that community and tenant newsletters are particularly effective ways to make residents more aware of how decisions are made at the City Council<sup>2</sup>. While some of the communication channels are broadcast in nature, others are more targeted.

Method	Frequency
Your Oxford	2 per year
City Briefing	3 per year
Facebook and Twitter	> daily
Oxford City Council website	> daily
Media releases	> daily
Service specific briefings	> Bi-monthly
Community and tenant newsletters (Leys News)	Quarterly?
Television and radio	Ad hoc

## Social research

The social research function delivers high quality quantitative data to support policy development, service delivery, and project implementation. This research is carried out through both the Council's social research functions (statistical analysis) and as part of its consultation function (opinion and perception research).

Social research is carried out by a central service within the Policy, Culture and Communications service area, and includes:

- Finding and sourcing data that can inform particular research questions.
- Researching and analysing data to inform strategies and plans.

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<sup>2</sup> Living in Oxford Talkback survey spring 2014.

- Making research data available internally across service areas and externally to the public and communities, to enable them to understand the needs of their areas. The data can be used to help groups to develop funding bids, for example the social inclusion fund. This is done through the annual summary leaflet, website, monthly statistical publication and general statistics enquiry service.
- Providing research data that advocates the city's needs to other agencies that provide services.
- Providing links to national research.

Much of this data is available to the general public through the City Council's Statistics about Oxford website at

[http://oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decC/Statistics\\_about\\_Oxford\\_occw.htm](http://oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decC/Statistics_about_Oxford_occw.htm)

## Consultation

Consultation seeks public feedback on analysis, options, services and plans in order to inform decision-making, and in some cases this is statutory: the Council's annual budget for example. These decisions are critical to the successful development of Council policy and strategy, service design and service delivery. Consultation can only be successful with the active participation of the public.

Oxford City Council carries out its consultation through a variety of methods including a Citizens' Panel, postal and on-line surveys and focus groups; the different methods are described in the Consultation Toolkit. Consultation support is provided as a central service by the Consultation Officer, while management of the Citizens' Talkback Panel is managed by a specialist market research company, currently Ipsos MORI.

The Citizens' Panel model has been at the heart of Oxford City Council's approach to consultation. The Talkback Panel – consisting of around 1,000 residents (aged 16+) - was first established in 1997, when it was set up as a partnership initiative involving Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire County Council, the health authority, and Thames Valley Police. Also at this time, the Talkback Panel provided data for the Place survey, which allowed Oxford City Council to benchmark its performance against other local authorities.

Over time partners withdrew funding, but information sharing continues largely through the Oxford Strategic Partnership's programme boards. For example, in its role as a member of the Safer Communities Partnership, the City Council has continued to gather annual information from Talkback about community safety issues. The results are fed back to Thames Valley Police, who continue to reference Talkback findings in their annual report and forward planning.

While every effort is made to ensure that the panel membership is representative of the city's population (by using the demographic profile of Oxford residents from the Census 2011 data), the profile of respondents is significantly skewed towards white, older, female residents. To address this the Panel is refreshed every two years and ways of reaching

under-represented groups are called upon. For example, young people's views can be accessed through Youth Voice as described in chapter 12.

Oxford City Council has decided in principle to use Local Government Informa as a survey methodology to measure residents' satisfaction. This will offer the council the opportunity to benchmark performance across other participating local authorities (the Place survey no longer exists). The methodology requires that at least 1,000 randomly selected responses must be received, and this will be administered by Ipsos MORI.

The principle of transparency and clarity is applicable to Oxford City Council's Local Development Planning engagement practices. The Council is required by law to consult on both Development Plan Documents and Supplementary Planning Documents, and the consultation process for each of these document types as well as consultation on planning applications is detailed in the Statement of Community Involvement.

The use of on-line technology enables transparency and clarity: information can be readily accessed by computer users, results and plans can be published. For information related to consultations Oxford City Council aims to post on its consultation website.

[www.consultation.oxford.gov.uk](http://www.consultation.oxford.gov.uk)

The representational and scrutiny role of councillors is vital to the consultation process, and all councillors must be informed of any consultations taking place within their wards.

In their role as community leaders, councillors play a key role in consultation as they have a unique relationship with residents and can provide valuable feedback from their involvement with local groups, partnerships and organisations. They are active members of local community initiatives and sometimes the instigators of consultation initiatives.

In their role on scrutiny committees, councillors provide a 'critical friend' challenge to Council decision-making and scrutinise external organisations and partnerships that influence and deliver services within the city.

## 10. Timeliness<sup>3</sup>

Oxford City Council recognises that engagement should begin early in the policy development or decision-making process when the policy is still under consideration and views can genuinely be taken into account.

There are several stages of policy development, and it may be appropriate to engage in different ways at different stages. As part of this, there can be different reasons for, and types of consultation, some radically different from simply inviting response to a document. Every effort should be made to make available the information an early stage to enable contestability and challenge.

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<sup>3</sup>[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/255180/Consultation-Principles-Oct-2013.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/255180/Consultation-Principles-Oct-2013.pdf) downloaded 15th May 2014.

Timeframes for consultation should be proportionate and realistic to allow stakeholders sufficient time to provide a considered response and where the consultation spans all or part of a holiday period policy makers should consider what if any impact there may be and take appropriate mitigating action. The amount of time required will depend on the nature and impact of the proposal (for example, the diversity of interested parties or the complexity of the issue, or even external events), and might typically vary between two and 12 weeks.

The timing and length of a consultation should be decided on a case-by-case basis; there is no set formula for establishing the right length. In some cases there will be no requirement for consultation, depending on the issue and whether interested groups have already been engaged in the policy-making process. For a new and contentious policy, 12 weeks or more may still be appropriate. When deciding on the timescale for a given consultation the capacity of the groups being consulted to respond should be taken into consideration.

## **11. Feedback**

Oxford City Council applies the principle of feedback (rather than a bureaucratic box ticking exercise), which recognises that open policy making should use real discussion with affected parties and experts to make well-informed decisions, and that consultation forms part of a wider scheme of engagement.

This means that policy-makers and decision makers should:

- explain what responses have been received and how they have been used. Results, including the number of responses, should be published within 12 weeks of the consultation closing and be mindful of current data protection legislation
- ensure that participants receive feedback about how their contributions have informed the outcome, and ensure that there are communications channels that allow for follow-up including reporting on final decisions and/or implementation plans
- ensure that Information and viewpoints have been collated and objectively assessed – there must be a fair interpretation of the results
- policy-makers should be prepared to change their plans as a result of community engagement. Citizens who participate in any form of community engagement must believe that their voice will be taken seriously, and that things can be changed if there is support for change
- ensure that engagement will be given sufficient priority, space, time and resources. There must be a genuine attempt to understand and incorporate other opinions even when they conflict with the existing point of view.

## **12. Inclusiveness and accessibility**

Oxford City Council recognises that providing the opportunity for the participation of all stakeholders and citizens who have an interest in, or who would be affected by, a specific decision will inform better outcomes. This includes groups that are sometimes more challenging to engage such as young people, older people, minority groups, and people with disabilities.

It means that information should be easy to comprehend, and consideration should be given to appropriate forms of consultation by providing different ways for people to be engaged and ensuring that people are not excluded through barriers of language, culture or opportunity.

The results of Census 2011 are now available so it is possible to compare the demographic profile of participants with that of the population of Oxford. This has highlighted the need for focussed engagement with younger people (15-25 year olds), older people (over 65 year olds) and non-native English speakers.

### **Younger People**

To enable younger people to influence and shape the services that affect their lives, Oxford City Council has established Youth Voice. This is a programme to support children and young people in Oxford between the ages of 15 and 21 (25 where there are special educational needs).

Youth Voice aims to:

- pro-actively listen to and act on the feedback of young people and to influence partners to do the same
- provide more and better personal and professional development opportunities to young people enabling them to effectively engage with decision makers
- enable young people to have increased access to decision-makers in their local community, the city, regionally and nationally
- To create a legacy of participation across the city and for young people to become role models and ambassadors for change now and in their adult lives.

The City Council's Youth Ambition Strategy details the Council's approach to engaging young people in positive activities and its aim to more fully involve young people in how we develop and deliver services.

### **Older People**

Oxford City Council co-ordinates the Ageing Successfully Partnership to provide a partnership approach to addressing the needs of older people in the city; to improving wellbeing; and to addressing isolation and increasing engagement with older people.

An Older People's Needs Assessment has been carried out to review the needs of the older population of Oxford. This work will help inform the City Council of the longer term support for older people in the city.

The City Council works closely with the 50+ Network which is a volunteer-run community group whose aim is to engage with older people on relevant issues and increase involvement. This group have a representative on the Ageing Successfully Partnership.

### English as a second language

As discussed earlier, many languages are spoken by the residents of Oxford. In the 2011 census 16% of residents said that English was not their first language, so there are challenges for developing services and policy that should be taken into consideration when determining the method of engagement.

Oxford City Council, through its Communities and Neighbourhoods team, is increasingly using community and voluntary networks to raise awareness of engagement activities that are less dependent upon a high level of competence in reading and writing English.

This is demonstrated in recent work with the Somali and Polish communities, where officers have:

- made use of community translators in meetings with the community
- tailored presentations to enable better clarity for people who have English as a second language
- attended pre-existing community led meetings rather than setting up separate City Council meetings. This maximises the number of people we can get feedback from
- advertised City Council opportunities through community newspapers and other sources to ensure we reach a wider cross section of the community.

The Communities and Neighbourhoods team facilitated a meeting between the Somali community and Scrutiny panel to receive feedback from the community on their experiences of living in Oxford and their perceptions of Oxford City Council. A number of the people in meeting had limited or no English and as such we made use of community leaders that were willing to act as an informal translator to ensure they were included at all times.

Communities and Neighbourhoods have worked closely with Human Resources to receive feedback on our recruitment process and how we are perceived as an employer from the Polish Community. A presentation was tailored to be more informal and visual for the community and it enabled plenty of opportunities for feedback and clarification. Both departments worked closely with the Oxford Polish Association to advertise the event and ensure that those who may not receive information from the City Council on a regular basis were aware of the meeting.



### **13. Summary**

This policy statement describes how Oxford City Council engages its communities in decision-making. Not only does it build on the Consultation Strategy 2010-13 and the community engagement themes set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 2014-18, it takes account both of the demographic changes occurring in Oxford and the ideas and feedback provided during the process of creating this plan.

The intended purpose of this new three-year Community Engagement Policy Statement was to provide a framework for how the Council engages with its residents and communities to develop a greater understanding of their needs, and to increase the level and quality of involvement in the decisions that affect their lives. To achieve these objectives it has become clear, through the development of this policy statement, that the framework must be based upon the Principles of Community Engagement.

Analysis of consultation results showed that there was a keen interest in how we carried out public engagement, strong support for the community engagement principles and, naturally, areas where we could do better. These improvement suggestions have been factored into the redefinition and re-purposing of the Principles of Community Engagement. For example, concern was raised about the publication of consultation results and the outcomes of consultation, leading to scepticism that residents' voices were being listened to. To address this we have set a target to publish the results of 70 per cent of consultations within eight weeks by the end of the year.

It would be misleading to suggest our principles existed on paper only – indeed our focus on the demographics of the participants of public involvement activities and the development of corrective actions in partnership with Ipsos MORI is testament to this. This Community Engagement Policy Statement elevates the importance of the principles and the need to embed them further into our organisational culture.

### **14. The way forward**

Oxford City Council is committed to continuous improvement. For community engagement this will continue to be done through benchmarking, engaging with professional organisations and the adoption of new technology.

#### **Benchmarking**

Benchmarking of consultation services is carried out across Oxfordshire and nationally when, for example, budget consultation practices are explored. Membership of the Consultation Institute and the relationship with Ipsos MORI ensures that we stay current with best practice. Research carried out through the Talkback Panel has shown an appetite for using mobile devices for responding to surveys – an example of technology supporting improvements to accessibility, which will be piloted during the year.

## New Technology

The methods of engaging with residents of Oxford have changed considerably as a result of the increase in internet access, changes in the way of accessing the internet as well as how digital technology is used. For example, by 2012, 80% of all UK households had internet access, with 67 per cent of adults in Great Britain using a computer every day; this rises to over 80% amongst people under 45 years of age. Access to the Internet using a mobile phone more than doubled between 2010 and 2012, from 24% to 51, and in 2012 32% of adults accessed the Internet using a mobile phone every day.

Statistics about the level and type of internet use in Oxford are not available. However, as the city a very young population due to the large number of university students, we can expect that internet usage in Oxford is higher than the national average.

## Social Media

For younger people - a rapidly increasing proportion of Oxford residents - social media has become the form of communication. Social media is a good way to engage people with specific issues where a quick turn-around is required; it allows for two-way, real-time dialogue and is an easy and cost effective way of getting people involved. Social media is transparent and open, and is a good way to build communities (especially communities of interest).

To make consultation more inclusive and accessible, the Council will assess what technology can best achieve our objectives. Twitter and Facebook can be used to raise awareness of community engagement events and as a pointer to the consultation website. YouTube can be used to upload videos of proposals as another format for gathering resident feedback. In addition the use of external discussion forums run by the community for the community can be encouraged, for example, the Headington and Marston Neighbourhood Discussion Forum. However, a strong social media presence and robust social media guidelines must be in place before relying on it as a consultation mechanism.

Currently potential consultees are required to sign up for an account to respond on the consultation system. This is stopping people contributing and limiting the usefulness of promoting consultations on social media channels. People have often responded to social media posts saying that they aren't going to contribute because the process they have to go through is too inaccessible. The Council will consider relaxing its approach to mandatory sign-in for some consultations. This won't be possible for all consultations, including those that are statutory, but there is little doubt that breaking down this barrier to participation will help to increase interaction.

However it is acknowledged that on-line methods are not for everyone and the Council will continue to offer multiple engagement channels, such as the provision and processing of paper surveys and face to face engagement opportunities.

The Council's consultations will be made more accessible by simplifying questions, removing large policy documents and adding more visuals where possible. This will encourage interaction on mobile devices and engage an audience who in the past have not had time to interact before.

## **15. Appendix 1 - Case Studies.**

In order to understand the various types of engagement, below are 2 case studies. The first (Rose Hill Community Centre) is an example of how we have collaborated with the community on the development of a new community centre and the second (Open Space Event) is an example of how through talking to members of our community we have gathered information on Research.

### **Rose Hill Community Centre Case Study (Engagement Type: Collaborate)**

The need for a new community centre in the Rose Hill area in Oxford was identified in 2012.

This engagement was undertaken in two stages: preliminary research and discussion with service providers and users. This was followed by a consultation fun day event where the local community could cast their vote as to whether they wanted a new community centre or to refurbish the existing one. To manage this, a sub group of local residents and partners was launched to work with officers from the City Council. This collaborative approach has been vital to the success of this project.

The main objective and purpose for undertaking this project was to collaborate with the different communities to develop strong and active links so that the community could make decisions for themselves

A questionnaire was developed and then designed into a flyer which was delivered to every home in the Rose Hill area, each leaflet could either be posted at one of the three key locations in the area or could be returned by using the prepaid envelope attached. In addition to this OCC Communities and Neighbourhoods (CAN) officers provided frequent opportunities for local residents to have face to face discussions to complete the questions in 'walk and talk' sessions. These sessions took place at different times in the day in order to speak to as many residents as possible. The strapline on these questionnaires was translated into seven different languages to promote inclusiveness.

From this process the architect used the gathered information to work up a concept for a new community centre. This was then taken back out to the Rose Hill Sub Group and other community groups before a final concept drawing could be generated for public display during the week leading up to the voting day on the 17th November 2012.

The method of engagement proved a huge success, and everyone in the community had the opportunity to share their views and vote upon the different options available. The support for the new centre was clearly demonstrated by 78% of all those voting being in support.

The City Council is confident that through undertaking this engagement exercise the new community centre will become a hub for the residents of the surrounding area. A one stop shop that the community can be proud of as having helped to drive and develop themselves. The relationship between the community and the Council has strengthened as part of this exercise as well as increasing community cohesion in the area. Collaborating on this project has helped to build a community they are all proud to be a part of.

## **Open Space Event (Engagement Type: Research)**

This was an engagement event aimed at gathering information about the key issues that affect young people and through this research we have a better understanding of those issues.

The Open Space Event, where 35 young people came together, took place on 8th October 2013 at the Town Hall. The event was held to enable young people to discuss any issues that are important to them. By carrying out this research it improves our understanding of the issues important to young people. This in turn helps us when we are making decisions about particular areas and services and where we should target resources.

All the issues were put forward by young people, and they were given the space and time to discuss them in a way that suited them, without any preconceptions.

The young people who attended were from various ethnic backgrounds, in the lower third educational attainment bracket and from some of the most disadvantaged areas in the city.

In order to ensure that the young people felt comfortable we created a relaxed and friendly atmosphere by inviting the young people to host the event which was a great opportunity for them and something they enjoyed doing. We also ensured the lighting and branding made the space more inviting and less “stuffy”. This atmosphere allowed young people to feel at ease enough to discuss issues important to them without a set agenda and some difficult topics were addressed.

The topics young people discussed included:

- Oxford Bus Fares – young people have to stay in education longer but still have to pay adult fares at the age of 16.
- Communication – most young people who had heard about what is offered had done so through word of mouth highlighting the importance of outreach. Other forms of innovative communication need to be explored.
- Positive Choices – young people wanted more support with financial management, sex education and alcohol and drugs education and didn’t always want to be taught about the extremes.

Having a central scribe so young hosts did not have worry about writing everything down worked well and took the pressure off hosts.

95% of participants thought their experience was satisfactory or above, with 81% rating the event at 4 or 5 (5 being the best).

We left the event with some very useful information about the issues that are important to young people, how young people feel about their lives and growing up in Oxford. This piece of research will help us when we are planning future consultations aimed at young people and also when we are making decisions on allocating resources to projects aimed at young people.

The output from this engagement exercise has been a greater understanding of the issues that are important to young people. With this information we can then develop further stages of engagement such as consultation where we take the information from the Research stage and use it to develop options to consult on.