



Community Engagement Strategy and Action Plan

Contents

Introduction	3
1. What is community engagement?	4
1.1 Principles of engagement	4
2. Why is community engagement important?	5
3. The national and local context	6
3.1 National policy context	6
3.2 Local policies and partnerships.....	7
3.3 Local factors.....	8
4. How will we engage with our local communities?.....	9
4.1 Our engagement aims	9
4.2 How we will achieve our aims	9
4.3 Our existing policies and strategies	10
4.4 Our existing and future engagement activity	11
5. How will we monitor and review this strategy and action plan?	12

Introduction

We are committed to being a listening council and providing a voice for rural life. The Council's vision is:

“We will make South Cambridgeshire a safe and healthy place where residents are proud to live and where there will be opportunities for employment, enterprise and world-leading innovation. We will be a listening Council, providing a voice for rural life and first-class services accessible to all.”

We will do this by:

- i. being a listening council, providing first class services accessible to all
- ii. ensuring that South Cambridgeshire continues to be a safe and healthy place for you and your family
- iii. making South Cambridgeshire a place in which residents can feel proud to live
- iv. assisting provision for local jobs for you and your family
- v. providing a voice for rural life.

Councils are at the heart of local democracy and it is therefore essential for us to ensure that all sections of our local community have the opportunity to engage with us. The new way of assessing how effectively local partnerships are working together to deliver local people's priorities (Comprehensive Area Assessment), which commenced in April 2009, will focus on issues that are important to the local community and will require that citizens and communities have increased opportunities to hold public services to account.

This community engagement strategy sets out what we mean by engagement, why we are committed to engaging our local communities and partners and how we plan to engage now and in the future. It has been designed to ensure that engagement opportunities are provided in the most appropriate way for all stakeholders to be involved and give feedback.

1. What is community engagement?

Community engagement can mean different things to different people, different communities and different services.

The Government defines engagement as ‘the process whereby public bodies reach out to communities to create empowerment opportunities’¹. In the same document, community engagement is defined as “the giving of confidence, skills and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for them”.

Engagement activity can happen at various levels² including:



4. Empowering – supporting the local community to take action on its own
3. Involving – acting together with the local community
2. Consulting – asking people what they think so that decision-makers can make even better decisions
1. Informing – giving people knowledge so that they are informed

All levels of participation are important.

1.1 Principles of engagement

The key principles for a successful approach to community engagement are:

- Effective communication
- Inclusivity and accessibility
- A consistent approach across the organisation and with partners
- Shared learning
- A genuine commitment to community focus
- A willingness to respond to and deliver change which reflects the views of the public

Successful engagement requires time, commitment and cultural change to overcome barriers that often exist.

¹ Definition taken from ‘An Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success’, Communities and Local Government, 2007

² The Consultation Institute, 2008

2. Why is community engagement important?

Local experience and national evidence demonstrate that there will be benefits to both communities and the Council when engagement is undertaken, including:

- Strengthening the democratic legitimacy of government and the civic life of the community;
- More efficient and effective services that better reflect the needs of service users and have higher levels of customer satisfaction;
- A reduction in community inequalities;
- Safer and stronger communities, with a more attractive built environment that meets the people's needs;
- Greater local ownership of Council services;
- A better understanding of how and why local services need to change and develop for everyone, including the most vulnerable in our communities;
- Improved local reputation;
- Greater job satisfaction for Council staff who see that the services they provide are meeting expressed local needs.

Engagement should occur in a systematic way that is integral to everyday working practices. Engagement should not be a one off activity, but provide the fundamental basis of everything we do.

3. The national and local context

3.1 National policy context

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 introduced a duty on local authorities to involve, inform and consult representatives of local persons where it is appropriate and lawful to do so. The duty comes into effect from April 2009.³

The 2008 White Paper 'Communities in control: real people, real power' set out plans to introduce a duty on local authorities to promote democracy, as well as other proposals including:

- Schemes to support volunteering and community building.
- Improving information available to local citizens.
- The introduction of a new duty for local authorities to respond to petitions.
- Encouraging all local authorities to implement participatory budgeting by 2012.
- Enabling local authorities to provide modest incentives for voting.
- Support for more neighbourhood councils, particularly in urban areas, and neighbourhood management.
- Engaging more people in commissioning local goods and services.
- Enabling local people to have more of a say in the planning system, by providing more funding to support community engagement in planning and enabling planners to develop stronger skills in working with communities.
- Giving tenants a greater say through local compacts, choice based lettings and tenant co-operatives.
- Supporting the engagement of older and young people by the government.
- Raising the visibility of overview and scrutiny committees; making public officials more visible and accountable; and making it easier for local people to demand a local referendum on directly elected mayors.
- Making it easier for people to stand for election as a local councillor and balance work, family and other commitments with duties as a councillor; giving backbench councillors more powers to make changes in their wards with discretionary local budgets they can target on local priorities; and plans to make it easier for local people to find information on ways they could be active in civic roles in their communities.
- Increasing the number of people helping to run or own local services and assets, such as community centres, parks, disused schools, shops or pubs.

The National Indicator set, introduced in 2008, includes measures to monitor the progress of local authorities and their partners in developing community engagement, for example,

NI 2	Percentage of people who feel they belong to their neighbourhood
NI 3	Civic participation in the local area
NI 4	Percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality
NI 6	Participation in regular volunteering
NI 7	Environment for a thriving third sector
NI 110	Young People's participation in positive activities

³ Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, 2007, paragraph 138.

The new Comprehensive Area Assessment includes an evaluation of the effectiveness of local authorities and their partners in developing community engagement.

3.2 Local policies and partnerships

3.2.1 Local Strategic Partnership and Local Area Agreement

Community engagement is built into local partnership priorities:

- a) During 2006 and 2007, a variety of consultations took place to develop priorities for the South Cambridgeshire Sustainable Community Strategy 2008-2011. One of the key priorities for residents was having opportunities to participate in decision-making. As a result the strategy includes the following priority:

“Engaging with the local community, including children and young people and other hard-to-reach groups, parish councils, voluntary organisations and neighbourhood forums to improve services”.

- b) The Cambridgeshire Local Area Agreement 2008-2011 includes the following indicators and targets:

National Indicator	Indicator Description ⁴	Baseline	2009/10 Target	2010/2011 Target
4	Percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality	31% ⁵ (08/09)	-	34%
7	Environment for a thriving third sector	15.3% (tentative)	-	3.9% improvement
110	Young People’s participation in positive activities	76.2% (08/09)	80%	82%

3.2.2 The Cambridgeshire Compact

The Cambridgeshire Compact is a partnership agreement between statutory bodies, including South Cambridgeshire District Council, and the voluntary and community sector, which has been designed to improve relationships and provide a framework within which to understand what to expect from each other.

The Compact undertakings include that statutory organisations will:

- Undertake appropriate consultation with the voluntary sector to ensure that as commissioners we are working towards consistency in commissioning, funding and monitoring practice.
- Provide for quality in consulting the voluntary and community sector and others, including providing for a 12 weeks minimum consultation period wherever possible.

⁴ Definitions can be found at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/performanceframeworkpartnerships/nationalindicators/>

⁵ The 2008/09 South Cambridgeshire baseline is 34% and the agreed local target is 36%.

- Recognise the entitlement of voluntary and community groups to campaign within the law in order to advance their aims and objectives, and to comment on and challenge public sector policy, irrespective of any funding relationship that might exist.
- Recognise the breadth of knowledge and ideas within the voluntary and community sector and agree to value and utilise these resources when developing policy, strategy and service delivery.

3.3 Local factors

Community engagement needs to take into account key factors relevant to South Cambridgeshire:

- a) **Growth.** The regional spatial strategy and local development framework envisage major growth in South Cambridgeshire in the next 10-15 years. The Council and its partners are already involving local people in planning for this growth. The delivery of the growth agenda will include involving new residents in developing and sustaining successful communities, which in many cases will involve different approaches to community engagement to those currently used by the Council.
- b) **The population of the district.** Overall, South Cambridgeshire is one of the least deprived districts in the country. Nevertheless, there are pockets of disadvantage and deprivation that need to be taken into account in the Council's approach to community engagement. The district's Gypsy and Traveller community is a particular group whose needs should be addressed. Population projections show a growing proportion of older people in the district.
- c) **Working with Parish Councils.** For the most part South Cambridgeshire consists of a rural area with a network of parish councils. Already the Council works with and supports the 102 parish councils, for example, in developing and delivering parish plans and through the recently established regular meetings with parish councils. Working with parish councils is a key aspect of this strategy.
- d) **Partnerships.** The Council works with its partners through partnerships such as Cambridgeshire Together and the Local Strategic Partnership to develop and deliver its community engagement objectives.

4. How will we engage with our local communities?

4.1 Our engagement aims

In order to ensure that the Council addresses engagement activity in a consistent and joined up way the following aims have been agreed:

- i. To put **public involvement at the centre** of everything we do
- ii. To strive for a **broad representation** of our residents
- iii. To be **honest, open and transparent** in communications with the public to ensure there is easy access to relevant and clear information
- iv. To ensure that the views, needs, expectations and **outcomes of engagement** activities are used to inform decision making processes, policy development and service planning
- v. To provide **clear guidance** and promote consistent standards of engagement across the Council
- vi. To listen to communities and **give feedback** to participants about outcomes of engagement activities

4.2 How we will achieve our aims

- To put public involvement at the centre of everything we do:

We will ensure that the views, concerns and expectations of the public are considered in decisions that are made. This will be achieved through the role of elected members and by providing a wide range of opportunities to actively engage with relevant stakeholders.

- To strive for a broad representation of our residents:

We will consider who needs to be engaged when exercising various functions and ensure that stakeholders are appropriately represented.

- To be honest, open and transparent in communications with the public to ensure there is easy access to relevant and clear information:

All engagement activities will have clear aims, objectives and outcomes to ensure that stakeholders feel that they are being engaged in an honest, open and transparent nature.

- To ensure that the views, needs, expectations and outcomes of engagement activities are used to inform the Council's policy development, service planning and decision making:

We will consider ways of increasing public involvement at meetings to extend opportunities to influence decision making throughout the council.

- To provide clear guidance and promote consistent standards of engagement across the Council:

A toolkit will be developed to accompany this strategy and action plan to help officers deliver a consistent standard of engagement.

- To listen to communities and give feedback to participants about outcomes of engagement:

We will ensure that feedback is communicated to participants to inform them of the way in which their views and concerns may have influenced decisions, policy development and service delivery. Feedback will cover what has been done as a result of their input; what is going to be done and when; and what is not going to be done, and why.

4.3 Our existing policies and strategies

Appropriate engagement activity will be central to achieving the Council's vision and is already included within many of our policies and service plans.

The District Council's Aims, Approaches and Actions for 2009 onwards are present within service plans and include:

Relevant Council Aims	Relevant Council Actions for 2009/10
We are committed to being a listening council providing first class services accessible to all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up a user group of residents that will look at three areas of service delivery by 2010 • Prepare and consult on a Statement of Community involvement on planning issues • Work with voluntary organisations to establish a relationship with hard to reach and vulnerable residents • Establish a system of satisfaction surveys by May 2010, that will be used to improve all the services that we provide
We are committed to providing a voice for rural life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist at least three Parish Councils to produce Parish Plans from 2009 • Introduce a new system of quarterly meetings to which all parish councils will be invited to send up to 2 representatives from 2009 • Ensure that each Cabinet Member attend at least three Parish Council meetings a year from outside their ward from 2009 • Work with others to develop a Community Transport Plan for the District by 2010

4.3.1 Comprehensive Equalities Policy

The Council's current draft policy includes a commitment to the following principle:

Encouraging 'real' participation in local democracy by people who may normally feel excluded from decision-making processes. In doing this, we will ensure that we seek the views of groups who are particularly vulnerable or at risk of social exclusion or have found it difficult to access our services or receive favourable outcomes from them.

4.3.2 Local Development Framework

The Local Development Framework Core Strategy was prepared following a programme of consultation and public participation. A Statement of Community Involvement on planning issues is due to be consulted on by September 2010.

4.3.3 Customer Service Strategy

The Customer Service Strategy is focused on our determination to deliver high quality, responsive, accessible, value for money services. We have used the local government Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA) three customer service themes to provide a framework for the strategy and action plan. In summary these are:

- *Responsive services* – understanding what customers want and designing, where feasible, services to meet their needs.
- *Accessible services* – ensuring that services are accessible and convenient to all customers.
- *Efficient and effective services* – getting good value for money and making the best use of resources.

4.3.4 Communications Strategy

The Communications Strategy (September 2007) states that:

“...local government communication is a set of activities that ensure regular contact with groups of people (stakeholders) wider than service users and residents. It is also about engaging with and keeping staff up-to-date and involved in changes and developments. It builds and maintains effective relationships with the news media, develops a community identity, promotes a sense of place, and communicates and joins up with partners.”

Our main communication actions are aimed at high priority stakeholder groups such as residents, parish councils and identified hard-to-reach groups.

4.4 Our existing and future engagement activity

The Council currently informs, consults, involves and empowers the public in a range of ways, for example:

- South Cambs Magazine
- Website
- Democratic services
- Consultation on planning applications
- Growth areas stakeholder participation
- Tenant participation
- Youth participation
- Support for community-led plans
- Forums (agents, business users, disability)
- Satisfaction surveys.

More detailed engagement activity is mapped by service area at **Appendix A**. The activity is mapped alongside future planned action.

5. How will we monitor and review this strategy and action plan?

This strategy will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure it continues to meet the needs of our local communities and the needs of our stakeholders. This will be assessed using our Local Area Agreement targets (see 3.2) and the other relevant indicators within the National Indicator Set (see 3.1).

The Executive Management Team and the Leader's Portfolio Holder Meeting will monitor the action plan on a 6-monthly basis.