



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROTOCOL

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This protocol will be developed in the light of experience.  
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**Aberdeen City Council**  
**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROTOCOL**  
**Introduction**

**Purpose:** to set out corporate expectations for City Council officers undertaking community engagement.

**Background:** The City Council and its partners will involve the communities of Aberdeen in the planning and delivery of their services. Appendix 1 provides more detail on why we have to increase and improve our engagement with our communities.

**Definition:** community engagement is a general term covering a range of different levels of participation; it refers to a two way discussion between those who make decisions and those affected by decisions. Appendix 1 provides more detail.

**Protocol**

This is a step by step guide to planning and undertaking a community engagement initiative. The Community Development Section can give you further advice and support.

The scoping section helps you define your initiative clearly before embarking on the sequence set out in the steps section.

**Scoping**

Set out the scope of your community engagement initiative by answering...Why?...What?...When?...Who?...you are engaging.

1. Why?

You need a clear reason for starting a new community engagement initiative. Write down the reason(s) and consider whether existing data can give you what you want. Has the target community already given its views, preferences, priorities, attitudes through some other means (e.g. Planning for Real event, Citizen's Panel, Community of Interest Forum, Community Council)? If so you may not have to begin a new initiative or may only need a more limited exercise to supplement existing data.

2. What?

If you are going ahead you need to decide what level of engagement is required. This will relate to your purpose. Four levels of community engagement have been identified: information exchange, consultation, joint decision-making, community empowerment. The following example illustrates each level.

## CHOOSING THE LEVEL

If your purpose is to seek community involvement in setting up a new Council 'one stop shop' in a specific area the four levels would offer the following community engagement opportunities.

1. Information exchange: e.g. we are opening a Council 'one stop shop' in your local shopping centre... have you any information we should take into account?
2. Consultation: e.g. we plan to open a Council 'one stop shop' in your area... what should we consider before choosing its location?
3. Joint Decision Making: e.g. we are considering placing a Council 'one stop shop' in your area... will community organisations send representatives to a joint project team to help develop a proposal and see it established?
4. Community Empowerment: e.g. 'your community' is invited to apply for an annual grant to establish and run a neighbourhood information centre that includes a one-stop contact with Council services.

In this example the likely relevance to each level is as follows

1. Information exchange: this could be acceptable and you would be able to take account of minor suggestions but it is too late to take account of any major issues raised by the community.
2. Consultation: here a limited (but clear) opportunity to influence the Council's decision is on offer. The Council will decide and may or may not be influenced by the community's views.
3. Joint decision-making: this implies an extended dialogue where a range of considerations can be explored and debated and a consensus sought. The level of joint decision-making remains at the working group level – the Council will take the final decision.
4. Community empowerment: this level gives some control to the community within a framework set by the Council (e.g. re financial accountability, agreed aims and objectives, joint management agreement). The Council gives up some control but gets a payback in terms of community development.

Once you have identified what level of engagement is required this needs to be clearly stated in any communications. It is important to the credibility of your initiative that you do not exaggerate the level of influence you can offer.

### 3. When?

The timing of your community engagement initiative should take account of other initiatives. This is to avoid clashing with other initiatives or to integrate with other initiatives.

An initiative to bring some corporate consultation together within an annual policy cycle is to be developed in the near future.

The timescale of your initiative must take account of:

- the period required for community groups to canvas their members (typically 8 weeks)
- the committee timetable
- the reporting date (e.g. deadline for responding to a third party; a project start date)

It is not acceptable to allow insufficient time for effective community engagement. If you have an inflexible deadline this should determine the level and scope of the community engagement.

### 4. Who?

You must identify the people and groups, within the community sector, who have an interest in and contribution to make to your community engagement initiative. They will include some or all of the following:

Citizens, service users/customers, community groups, community representatives, consultative forums.

In deciding who your target groups are you must also consider hard to reach and equalities groups. These are:

Potential service users/customers, older people, young people, people with disabilities, minority ethnic groups, the Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender community, women, and Gypsy/Travellers.

Knowing who you have to address, the purpose of the initiative, the level of influence you can offer and the time available will together form the basis of your community engagement initiative.

You may also be consulting other stakeholders including elected members, other Council Services, partner agencies, voluntary organisations, community planning challenge forums, and so on.

## Step Guide

### 1. Community Engagement Log

- (i) Having established the scope of your planned community engagement initiative you should, as soon as possible, log it on the community planning website ([www.communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk](http://www.communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk)). A form will ask you to summarise the purpose, timing and target groups. And you should say what stage you are at and your contact details.
- (ii) Look at other logged initiatives to identify clashes or opportunities to collaborate. Where initiatives are likely to coincide in terms of timing, target group or purpose you should contact those concerned to discuss amendment or preferably collaboration.

### 2. Community Engagement Agreement

- (i) Based on your scoping exercise and using the template provided (Appendix 2), set out your plans and commitment in a draft agreement including any anticipated contributions from other interested parties
- (ii) Discuss the draft agreement with representatives of the main groups who have a direct interest (including community representatives)
- (iii) Seek any approvals required (e.g. line-manager, Head of Service, Committee Convenor, relevant community planning forums, community groups)
- (iv) Share finalised agreement with all parties

### 3. Build-in Quality

To ensure a good quality initiative your community engagement plan and agreement should reflect...

- sustainability – i.e. effective use of time and resources, contribute action to strengthen communities
- inclusion – i.e. involving all the right people by thinking of who might find it hardest to participate and why, and what you might do to support their involvement
- commitment – i.e. an honest account of the level of influence on offer and clear arrangements to report back on the results are key issues in demonstrating a credible commitment to community engagement.
- good practice – i.e. working to the National Standards for Community Engagement which is a good practice tool that sets out principles and indicators for community engagement.
- (The National Standards for Community Engagement are included in the Zone (Tools and Resources: Systems, Processes and Procedures: Community Engagement)

#### 4. Check Progress

At this stage you should have made decisions about...

- (i) What level of community engagement is appropriate for your initiative (i.e. information exchange, consultation, shared decision-making or community empowerment).
- (ii) The target group(s) (i.e. neighbourhood, area, city, community of interest).
- (iii) What has already been decided and what is open to influence.
- (iv) How and when you will give feedback to consultees and those groups who might also have an interest in the results or responsibility for doing something.
- (v) How your community engagement initiative will take forward actions at different levels of planning (i.e. Service Plans, the Corporate Plan, the Community Plan; and related action plans, Neighbourhood Community Action Plans and Community of Interest Action Plans).

Your Draft Community Engagement Agreement will include all this information. The level of detail you include should be of the same scale as your proposed initiative.

#### 5. Secure approval and agree reporting arrangements.

Depending on the scale and impact of the work concerned this may include Council Committee(s), the Corporate Management Team (CMT), Service Senior Management Teams (SMT) and your line manager. The procedures for consulting these groups are set out on the Zone.

Guidance...

Consult a Council Committee when your initiative links to a key policy priority (see A Partnership for Aberdeen and successors) and/or will have a significant impact on communities or service users.

Consult CMT when your initiative links to high level actions in the Corporate Plan and/or requires a commitment from specific services and/or will have a significant impact on communities or service users.

Consult your SMT when your initiative links to action(s) in the Service Plan and/or requires a commitment within your service and/or will have a significant impact on communities or service users.

Consult your line manager in each case and to get advice on consulting SMT, CMT etc.

#### 6. Secure the involvement of Community Planning Forums

Consider which city-wide partnership and forums might have an interest and why. Let them see that you have taken account of partnership working or seek their advice.

Depending on the scale and impact of the work you may need to consult The Aberdeen City Alliance (TACA); specific Challenge Forum(s), partnerships or networks; individual partner agencies.

These structures have similar levels of interest as described for the Council (as above). To discuss potential TACA agenda items contact Ailsa Duncan, Principal Development Officer, Office of Chief Executive, tel (52) 3046. TACA meetings are bi-monthly see [www.communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk](http://www.communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk) for dates. Contact details for Challenge Forums are also on the website.

#### 7. Involve community organisations

Early discussion with community organisations will help you to design a community engagement initiative that is relevant and successful in your terms and the community's terms. Groups you might contact at the planning stage include Community of Interest Forums, the Civic Forum, Community Councils, Area Forums, service user groups or a small sample group of your target population.

You can discuss your plans with these groups in a number of ways...

- speak to the chair(s), facilitator/lead officer or council advisor
- request your proposal goes on their agenda
- request a special meeting with some or all of their members
- offer to meet representatives of several groups

You might have to see where your initiative can link to their own priorities and programme of meetings.

These groups meet at a varying frequency from monthly (e.g. most community councils) to quarterly (e.g. Civic Forum).

Take these timescales into account when speaking to or contacting them. For further advice on contacting these groups...

Civic Forum – Sandy Scott tel (52) 3196

Community Councils - Charles Lowe tel (52) 2559

Communities of Interest – see Community Development pages on the Zone.

Area Forums and local partnerships – Neighbourhood Community Planning Officers

#### 8. Finalise the Community Engagement Agreement

You should now have settled and had approval for the main elements of your initiative. Update your entry on the website log.

#### 9. Implementation

Your completed Community Engagement Agreement can form the basis of a project plan that sets out the timescales and sequence of actions. The following notes cover elements that will feature in most initiatives.

Communication: Take great care with all your written materials (including presentation scripts). Ensure you write in Plain English, avoid ambiguous questions, keep documents short and clear, and that you only make commitments that you are able to deliver. Check documents before you print and distribute them. And take account of the needs of people whose first language isn't English and who have sight impairments.

Timing: If you are tied to a tight timescale make sure you select a method and scale that can be achieved. If there is insufficient time for people to actively participate it is better to simply keep them informed of who is going to do what.

Early Participation: Starting community engagement early in the process lets citizens and community representatives know what you are going to do so they can contribute by responding to general ideas and helping to generate options rather than responding to formal (and possibly technical) documents.

Preparing participants: Look at it from the participants point of view. Are you explaining the initiative clearly? Are you providing the right information so they can decide whether to participate. Summarise the key points of why you are doing it, what its about and why you want them to be involved.

In the more intense levels of community engagement you will have to consider the extent to which you should offer to help participants develop their knowledge and skills. You can get advice on providing informal training and experiential learning from your Area Community Learning Team Leader or a Community Learning Development Officer.

Hard to reach groups: Hard to reach groups like:

- people with disabilities
- minority ethnic communities
- lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people
- young people
- older people
- Gypsy/Travellers
- Women

...may respond to specific actions which show that you understand and have taken positive action to support their participation.

Recording: transparency and 'Freedom of Information' call for clear recording of the essential details. The Community Engagement Agreement, any consultation documents and the feedback report will cover most queries and can be published. You should also be able to provide details of who was invited/involved at each stage; how they were selected; how it was advertised; the raw data used to draw conclusions; minutes of meetings; etc. General FOI guidance will give further support regarding obligations and exemptions (eg confidentiality of respondents).

## **Appendix 1 Why a Community Engagement Protocol is needed**

### **Rationale**

The rationale behind this Protocol is our need to do what is expected of us and to do this in an efficient and effective way.

### **Expectations**

The expectations that we develop more efficient and effective community engagement come from communities, the Council itself and national government. Some examples follow:

#### Local Government in Scotland Act 2003

Section 15 (1) requires local authorities, as facilitators, to consult and co-operate with community bodies...in the Community Planning process.

And, in the statutory guidance it says that consultation alone is not enough it must also include co-operation and participation.

#### The Aberdeen City Alliance Community Plan

The community planning partnership have made a commitment to listen to and take account of citizens' views from all Aberdeen's communities.

#### A Partnership for Aberdeen

The Council make a number of commitments about involving people including listening to citizens' views and carrying out genuine and meaningful consultation as part of the decision making process.

#### Best Value

The Continuous Improvement Plan makes several references to community engagement including: effective public communication, identifying community needs, designing services around citizens, and public performance reporting.

#### Strengthening Local Democracy

The Council strategy aims to "enable citizens to be active, informed and involved by bringing decision-making closer to citizens and supporting citizens to have more influence in decision-making."

The expectations of citizens and community organisations.

Community representatives are clearly expressing the importance of early participation, co-ordinated consultation, transparency and feedback.

### **Co-ordination**

The co-ordination of consultation will help inform a joined-up approach to planning and providing services and decrease the number of times people are asked for similar information.

There have been improvements in community engagement but people will continue to be critical about how we approach consultation when the outcome is different from their expectations.

We need a greater level of co-ordinated consultation to avoid overlapping consultation on the same questions about policy and services. In recent months there has been consultation on school improvement and amalgamation, community regeneration, beach-front development, neighbourhood planning, and development planning. Despite efforts made to plan good quality consultation these initiatives addressed overlapping issues that jointly impact upon communities.

### **Related Guidance**

- ACC Guidelines on Community Engagement  
(advises on the choice of level and methods of community engagement)
- National Standards in Community Engagement  
(supports high quality community engagement processes and results)
- Legal guidance (various)  
(statutory requirements for aspects of development planning, education provision, Freedom of Information Act, etc.)

### **Definition**

Community Engagement is the term used in the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 and in the 'Standards' issued by Communities Scotland. It is a general term covering a range of approaches. The Community Planning Statutory Guidance says

"Community Engagement in this context must involve consultation, co-operation and participation".

The City Council's Guidelines for Community Engagement suggest there are 4 levels: information exchange, consultation, joint-decision making and community empowerment.

The purposes of community engagement are varied but the most common are:

- to help local services more effectively meet neighbourhood and diverse community needs
- to help people to express their views and/or contribute to action in their community and the services it receives.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT

## Appendix 2

Title:	Give the initiative a name
Purpose:	What does the initiative aim to do; specify whether it is <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- information exchange</li><li>- consultation</li><li>- shared decision-making</li><li>- community empowerment</li></ul> (see ACC Guidelines for Community Engagement)
Influence:	Say how (if) the results will influence decision-making.
Stakeholders:	Identify all those with a direct interest in the process and/or results, including elected members (committees and local members), partner agencies, Council services, community organisations.  Say how they will be consulted on and involved in the Community Engagement Agreement.
Approach:	Outline the basic sequence of events and any steering/working groups that will be created.
Consultees:	List all the groups/populations/individuals to be 'engaged'.
Scope:	List all the main elements (i.e. topics/issues) that the initiative will focus on.
Methods:	State what community engagement methods are to be used (include what level of engagement it is and efforts to include communities of interest and hard to reach groups).
Decision Making:	State who will receive the outputs (e.g. consultation responses) and be responsible for deciding the outcome.
Timescale and Stages	Set out with approximate dates each of the main steps in the community engagement programme. Explain any external deadlines you have to meet (e.g. Council budget setting process; Scottish Executive deadline).
Feedback	Explain how and when participants and the public will be informed of the results of the engagement and any ensuing decisions/actions.
Responsible	Provide the name, title and contact details for the officer responsible for conducting the community engagement initiative.
Other:	Include any other details that help clarify your initiative.

