From mountain to sea

Aberdeenshire
COUNCIL

Engagement and Participation Policy

September 2021

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Policy Status	**Approved**
Responsible Officer	Engagement and Consultation Officer
Policy Sponsor	**Head of Customer & Digital Services**
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1 Forward - Our commitment to communities

This policy details our commitment to making it easier for everybody in Aberdeenshire to have a voice in community engagement undertaken by the council.

We want to build and maintain relationship with communities, and to make sure that when we carry out engagement that it's clear what we're trying to achieve.

We want to give you – as individuals or as part of groups – a stronger voice and greater influence over council decisions that affect you where we can.

And when we have engaged with communities, that shouldn't be the end. We will work to ensure that the results of our work with you is shared and that we learn from what we find.

The word 'community' means different things to different people, and this is something we recognise.

A community may be based on the place you live, by a common interest shared by a group of people, or by your own personal circumstances.

We know that some people may find it more difficult to be involved in engagement activities, or have found that their needs haven't always been considered.

For example, does disability, ethnicity, or sexuality make it more difficult to be involved? Across our communities, some people may face communication challenges, or mental health problems, and there can be particular challenges for those experiencing homelessness or who feel isolated in their community.

We want to ensure that these 'seldom-heard' groups are given equal opportunity to be involved in engagement activities and that we remove any barriers to participation. We also recognise that people may be members of several different communities and have a number of different perspectives.

Whatever your community, it is important that we engage when proposals are still at an early stage, and that we give plenty of time to allow you to consider the proposals and provide a full response. And when a decision is to be made, the outcomes of the engagement must be taken into account.

And engagement isn't a one-sided thing. Where appropriate, communities will be supported to start discussions with the council on their own terms to raise issues that are important to them.

This could be to discuss something that matter to their community, to have a role in the decision-making process, to help shape service changes or improvements, or to challenge decisions and seek support for alternatives. And in some case you may be better placed to take the lead on projects where it will achieve better outcomes.

We want to make sure we continually improve the way we engage with communities, by learning from the information we gather, by helping participants improve their skills, confidence and ability to participate, to monitor feedback, and to review the quality of engagement and what has happened as a result.

This policy is the starting point, and we look forward to working with you and your communities over the coming months and years.

2 Policy Statement

The Council Plan states that central to achieving the Council Priorities there is a need for continued collaborative working with the combined expertise that our communities, partners and employees bring when delivering improved outcomes in Aberdeenshire.

The aim of this policy is to ensure the Council is accessible and well informed about the issues that matter to Aberdeenshire's individuals and communities, including those seldom heard.

To help us achieve this outcome we will:

- Build and maintain relationships with communities, ensuring there is a shared understanding of the goal of community engagement exercises
- Empower individuals and communities by giving them a stronger voice and greater influence over council decisions that affect them when it is appropriate to do so
- Continuously learn from those who use our services, share results from community engagement exercises and coordinate community engagement exercises where possible
- Pursue best practice to improve community engagement.

This policy confirms the commitment of Aberdeenshire Council to focus on: the actual needs of our people; energising and empowering communities and Council and partner workers to find innovative solutions; building personal and community capacity, resilience, and autonomy.

By embedding community engagement, we will create opportunities for residents to actively contribute to matters that are important to them by cultivating an environment in which community involvement and participation is acknowledged, supported, encouraged, listened to, understood, and actioned.

Community engagement and participation aims to bring assets and skills together to transform relationships between Council services and the public. In doing so, we can embrace the opportunity to develop new ways of working which allow residents and communities to work as equal partners, and in some cases, to take the lead where this will achieve better outcomes.

3 Principles

Effective community engagement involves ongoing dialogue with a range of stakeholders within communities to inform how we plan and deliver services. The following principles have been adopted to help shape and drive successful engagement and echoes the principles set out in the National Standards for Community Engagement.

To enable the Council carry out effective community engagement, we will, as far possible:

- Involve people and organisations that are affected by the focus of our engagement, including seldom heard or easy to ignore groups; for example carers, children and young people and gypsies and travellers;
- Identify and mitigate any barriers to ensure inclusive participation;
- Set out a clear purpose for the engagement, which is based on a shared understanding of communities needs and ambitions;
- Work together to effectively achieve the aims of the engagement;
- Where possible work with residents and groups to find and use methods that are fit for purpose;
- Communicate clearly and regularly with the people, organisations and communities involved in the engagement, and provide feedback to participants in a timely manner;
- Assess the impact of the engagement and use what has been learned to improve future processes;
- Be accountable to all members of our communities;
- Take a place-based approach where possible to target the specific circumstances of a place and engage the community and a broad range of local organisations to focus on shared outcomes
- Plan engagement opportunities across services and partners to coordinate our approach

4 Scope

4.1 Defining Community Engagement and Participation

Community Participation or Engagement is a means of developing better services, better use of resources and encouraging more productive and positive relationships between communities and public bodies.

For the purposes of this policy, community engagement we use the definition set out in the National Standards for Community Engagement as:

"A purposeful experience which develops a working relationship between communities, community organisations and public bodies to help identify and act on community needs and ambitions. It involves a respectful two way dialogue between everyone involved, aimed at improving understanding and taking appropriate action that is supported by the community and community organisations to achieve positive change."

4.2 Defining our Communities

Communities are defined as groups of people that may or may not be connected by place, who share common interests, concerns, experiences or identities.

'Communities of place' share a locality or geographical place, while 'communities of interest' share an identity, background or an experience e.g., unpaid carers or business groups. Given this diversity, it is important that our engagement methods are accessible and broad-reaching.

We recognise that people are members of several different communities and that some people find it harder to make themselves heard than others. This can be the

case where individuals belong to marginalised groups or because they haven't been involved in a way that's properly inclusive. As a Council, we want to make sure that we actively involve all of our communities in a purposeful way.

4.3 Defining our methods

The method and level of participation in an engagement processes determines the depth, involvement and extent to which people have control over the process, the agenda, and the decisions.

The definitions given in **Figure 1** are used throughout this policy to encompass the range of activities in the various situations in which we interact with individuals, stakeholders, and communities.

Figure 1: Spectrum of participation

Increasing impact on the decision →					
	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Participation Goal	Keep communities and the public informed	Listen to and acknowledge concerns and comments, and take account of views in decision making	Work to ensure concerns and aspirations are directly related in the decisions made	Look for advice and innovation and incorporate this in decision as much as possible and seek to work innovatively with communities to allow them to shape policy and decisions as they are developed/evolve.	Implement what communities and the public decide without question
Promise to the public	Provide balanced and objective information in a timely manner	Obtain feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives and decisions	Work with the public to make sure that concerns and aspirations are understood and considered appropriately	Partner with the public in each aspect of the decision making	Place final decision making in the hands of the public

Adhering to the definitions given in **Figure 1** will ensure a consistent terminology and common language is used in community engagement processes and that there is clear expectation of what is required when engaging with communities.

Requirements for different levels of engagement is outlined in the Engagement and Participation Guide.

Working on behalf of their community, individuals can participate in a variety of ways, and to different levels of influence, in helping to identify community needs, generate solutions, plan new projects and influence how services are developed and delivered. The purpose of an engagement exercise should determine the appropriate level of engagement and identify who could be invited to be involved.

As a minimum, through open and honest communication the scope and opportunity for involvement should be clearly stated and when residents are involved in engagement processes, participation must always be acknowledged and participants given detailed feedback about the cumulative outcome of the process and how the exercise has influenced decision-making.

4.4   Describing the context of Community Engagement and Participation in Aberdeenshire

Community Engagement in Aberdeenshire should aim to enable a process where people work together to identify what change is required, make change happen in their communities and, have more power and influence over what matters to them.

Council Services need to be built around people and communities, their needs, aspirations, capacities and skills. Recognising this, community engagement should be a key day to day focus, as identified in the Council Plan, to give communities influence over how things are done through identifying new identify new priorities; evaluating performance; and being involved in developing services.

In some instances, the Council is legally required to engage with the community. In these cases, the legally required level of community engagement is the minimum standard and, must be fair and lawful. It must:

- be at a time when proposals are still at a formative stage
- give sufficient reasons for any proposal to permit 'intelligent consideration' and response
- provide adequate time for consideration and response; and
- the product of engagement must be conscientiously taken into account

Decisions on the level of community engagement beyond that legally required will depend on the decision to be made (or project/service to be delivered), the community's interest to participate, the need to understand the community's view, and the opportunity for the community to influence the decision.

There is a range of legislation and regulation that demands and promotes engagement with communities of place and of interest, including but not limited to:

- Carers (Scotland) Act 2016
- The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015

- The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014
- The Housing (Scotland) Act 2014
- Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Regulations 2014
- Learning and Development (Scotland) Regulations 2013
- The Equalities Act 2010
- Schools (Consultation)(Scotland) Act 2010
- Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006
- Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 as amended
- Environment Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005
- The Local Government in (Scotland) Act 2003
- Education (Scotland) Act 2002

4.5 Describing the context of inclusive engagement and participation

The term 'seldom heard' refers to under-represented people who use or might potentially use services and who are less likely to be involved in engagement and participation processes.

People in 'seldom heard groups' face multiple barriers affecting access to and use of services. A positive staff attitude can help facilitate better participation of people from these groups. Good relationships and honest communication between staff and seldom-heard people who use services underpin effective models of participation. An everyday approach to participation, where there is no distinction between participation and service delivery, is most effective in supporting seldom-heard groups

Many factors can contribute to people being seldom heard, including

- Disability
- Ethnicity
- Sexuality
- Communication impairments
- Mental health problems
- Homelessness
- Geographical isolation
- Those who experience inequality in outcome or opportunity

It is recognised that there are several key barriers and circumstances affecting these groups. Many people in the various groups have limited time, limiting the extent to which they can fully consider wider issues.

This policy recognises key ways to address these barriers, including:

- Treating people with respect and valuing individual contributions

- Describing clearly what someone can expect from getting involved and what they are expected to contribute

- Making sure people know they can say no to getting involved

- Offering a variety of activities and ways to get involved, such as helping others, learning, and socialising

- Allocating sufficient resources for communication, transport, meetings, support and payment

4.6 Describing the context of Community Empowerment in relation to participation and engagement in Aberdeenshire

When people feel they can influence what happens in their community and can contribute to delivering change, there can be many benefits. Communities can often achieve significant improvements by doing things for themselves, because they know what will work for them. They become more confident and resilient; there are often opportunities for people to gain new skills and for increased employment as well as improved access to services and support. Aberdeenshire Council has a responsibility to create the conditions that encourage and support strong, independent and resilient communities. Communities are often best placed to determine outcomes for local services, and Aberdeenshire Council should facilitate processes which fully engage communities in the decisions that are taken about the design and delivery of services to achieve those outcomes. It is important that community voices are heard, but that this engagement differs from community empowerment, where communities lead change for themselves.

Aberdeenshire Council recognises communities have their own autonomy and freedom independent of the council, can face barriers to participation and can find it difficult to be recognised or heard. Where appropriate, communities will be supported to initiate a dialogue with the Council on their own terms, with scope to raise issues that are important to them, when they wish to:

- Start a dialogue about something that matters to their community;
- Have their voice heard in policy and service development through contributing to decision-making processes;
- Participate in the design, delivery, monitoring or review of service provision, through contributing to service change or improvement;
- Challenge decisions and seek support for alternatives which improve outcomes.

5 Monitoring and Evaluation

To inform our approach to engagement and help with continuous improvement, we will evaluate engagement activity through evaluation and peer review.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and a diverse range of methods are utilised by Council Services to ensure they meaningfully engage with those who access services and live in our communities. We will assess the impact of the engagement and use what we have learned to improve future community engagement. For example, where appropriate we will assess to what extent:

- The outcomes the engagement process intended to achieve are met.
- Decisions which are taken include and act on the views of all participant individuals and groups obtained during the engagement process.
- Local outcomes, or services, are improved as result of the engagement process.

- Participants have improved skills, confidence and ability to take part in community engagement in the future.
- Partners are involved in monitoring and reviewing the quality of the engagement process and what has happened as a result.
- Feedback is provided to the wider community on how the engagement process has influenced decisions and what has changed as a result.

Where appropriate, VOiCE software will be used to assist the design and delivery of community engagement. This will enable officers to use a common approach for analysing, planning, monitoring, evaluating, and recording of community engagement. More information on VOiCE is available in the Engagement and Participation Guide.

To help understand the impact of engagement and inform reporting on engagement and participation, we will continue to monitor the extent to which residents and communities think the Council takes account of views and work collaboratively across Council Services to ensure we monitor, evaluate and report on the consequential impact of community engagement and its influence on outcomes.

6 Related Links

Aberdeenshire

The Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership Engagement and Participation guide.

Aberdeenshire Children & Young People's Charter

Tenant Participation Strategy 2019-2029

National

National Standards for Community Engagement

IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

Statutory Guidance on Part 3 (Children's Services Planning) of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014

7 Index of Documents

a) Policy

Revision Date	Previous Revision Date	Summary of Changes
09/09/2021	NA	Document Created

b) Distribution

Name	Title

	Directors and Chief Officers