



# **Customer Engagement Charter 2016-2020**

## **CONSULTATION SUMMARY**

**Summary of a consultation which asked for views on proposed policy for public engagement in South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse.**

**AUGUST 2016**

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## **SUMMARY**

**This report summarises responses to a consultation undertaken by South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council which asked for views on a proposed policy for public engagement.**

**The councils' 'Customer Engagement Charter' was first published in 2014. It sets out why, when and how the councils will engage residents, businesses and groups in the community and voluntary sector. To make sure the policy remains current and in line with recent government guidance, we made a number of small amendments to the policy and published this online in June 2016 for comment.**

**A short online survey was set up allowing people to have their say on the policy for a period of 4 weeks. 157 responses were received.**

**The consultation found that:**

- The large majority of respondents (86 per cent) agreed with the proposed policy and only 3 people disagreed with it**
- Most comments were supportive of the proposed policy**
- Some people said the council needed to do more to act on the outcomes of consultations and let people know what's happened, others drew criticism with the way the planning department takes into consideration public opinion**
- Six people said the council should avoid wasting money on consultations and public engagement exercises**

**Council officers have reviewed feedback from the consultation and made responses throughout this report. These detail where changes have been made to the policy.**

**The updated policy is recommended to councillors for adoption and once approved will be published on the councils' websites.**

## BACKGROUND TO THE CONSULTATION

Public engagement is a priority for the councils. Our corporate plan<sup>1</sup> commits us to:

*Putting residents at the heart of service delivery and seeking to provide an excellent customer experience, and;*

*Keeping residents and other stakeholders informed about our services, activities and spending to ensure that we take their views into account before making key decisions.*

These commitments are in addition to our legal duties to consult people when making changes to the delivery of services<sup>2</sup>, requirements to invite comments on the development of planning policies<sup>3</sup> and obligations to support groups who want to use community rights introduced as part of the localism agenda<sup>4</sup>.

Our Customer Engagement Charter, first published in 2014, explains how the councils will deliver on these commitments. It sets out why, when and how the councils will engage residents, businesses and groups in the community and voluntary sector.

The original policy comprised a set of principles that should be adhered to by the councils when undertaking any type of public engagement activity. These principles were retained in the updated version that went out to consultation. The policy was, however, rewritten to make it easier to read and made two minor amendments; namely:

- A requirement that formal consultations avoid election periods
- A requirement that consultations and engagement activities be communicated in plain English

Although the changes to our policy were minor, we felt it would be appropriate to go out to public consultation as this did not happen when the policy was first introduced in 2014.

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<sup>1</sup> South Oxfordshire District Council Corporate Plan 2012-2016, available from: [www.southoxon.gov.uk/corporateplan](http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/corporateplan)

<sup>2</sup> Section 3 (2) of the Local Government Act 1999

<sup>3</sup> Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 (as amended).

<sup>4</sup> Neighbourhood Plans, Right to Build, Right to Challenge and the Right to Bid were introduced as part of the Localism Act 2011. See: <http://mycommunityrights.org.uk>

## CONSULTATION METHODOLOGY

The proposed Customer Engagement Charter was published online on 1 June 2016. We sought to draw this to the attention of members of the public in a press release, use of social media and dedicated correspondence sent to people who'd previously registered an interest in council consultations.

To allow comment on the proposed policy we set up an online survey. The survey asked respondents how much they agreed with the policy and if they had any specific comments to make. Copy of the question wording used in the survey is shown in Appendix A.

To ensure the consultation was accessible to people who might have found it difficult to complete the online survey we made paper forms available on request.

The consultation lasted for four weeks and closed for comment on 28 June.

To make sense of the feedback received, we employed two types of analysis. In the first instance we looked at the headline quantitative measures of agreement with the policy. This was followed by coding of the free text comments to help understand the sentiment behind respondents' agreement or disagreement with each of the policies. The codes we generated identified frequently mentioned ideas, suggestions and issues. The findings of the consultation are set out in the next section of this report.

The consultation was conducted in full compliance with the council's existing Customer Engagement Charter<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/about-us/have-your-say/our-commitments-engaging-customers>

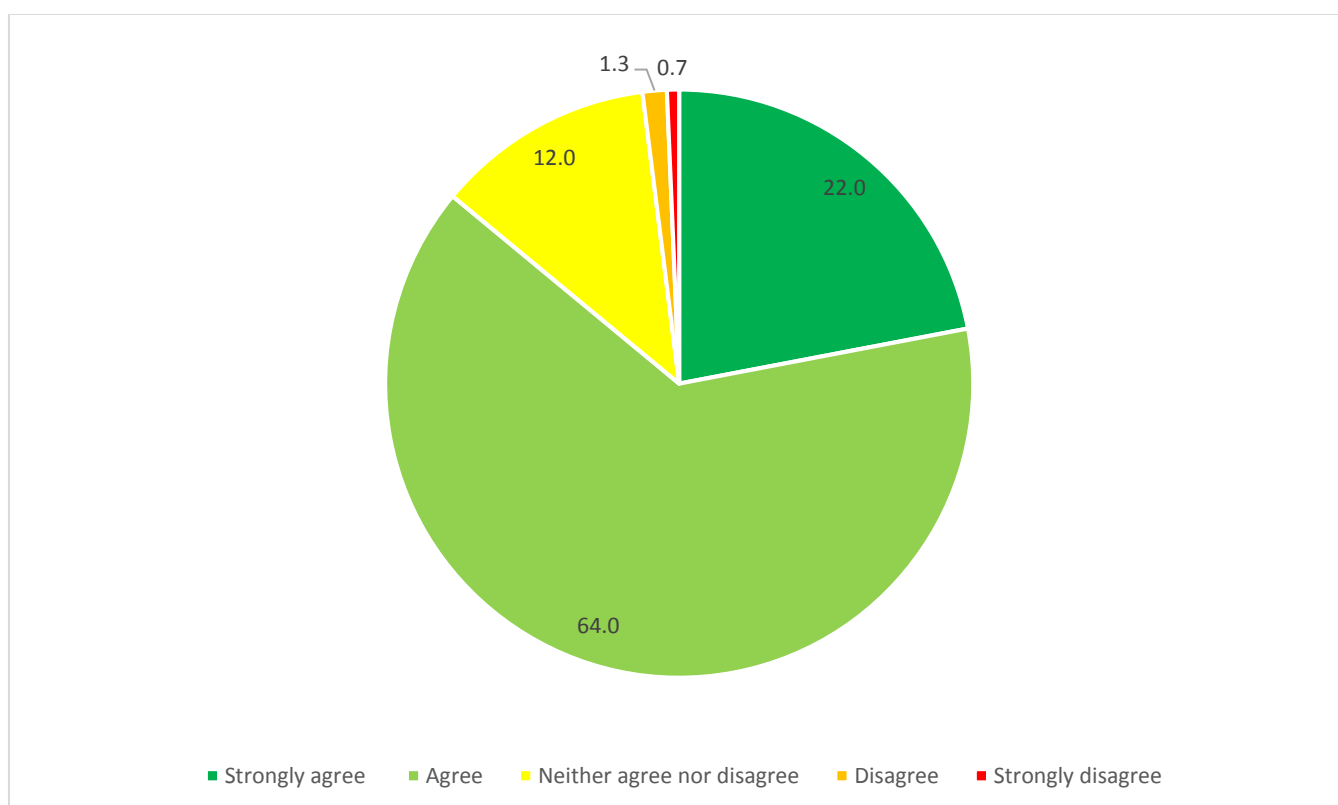
## CONSULTATION RESPONSES

157 people responded to the consultation. Of these, 88 responses were from people who live in South Oxfordshire and 57 were from the Vale of White Horse. One duplicate response was removed and is therefore not represented in the analysis here.

### Overall agreement with proposals

The large majority of respondents were supportive of the proposed policy. More than four out of every five said they agreed with it. In contrast, only three respondents said they disagreed with the policy. Figure 1 shows the distribution of these agreement scores.

Figure 1: Respondents' agreement with the proposed policy (%)



How far do you agree or disagree with the proposed Customer Engagement Charter?	No.	%
Strongly agree	33	22.0
Agree	96	64.0
Neither agree nor disagree	18	12.0
Disagree	2	1.3
Strongly disagree	1	0.7
	150	100

### Detailed comments

Respondents were also asked if they had any further comments or suggestions to make on the policy. Figure 2 shows the frequency of the different types of comment made.

Most comments were supportive of the strategy. Other comments mentioned the need for the council to act on consultation outcomes, communicate clearly and also make sure these principles are observed by the planning department when consulting on new developments.

Figure 2: Frequency of free text comments made by respondents

Comment type	Frequency
Supportive statement	30
Act on consultation outcomes	13
Presentation of policy document/ clear communication	10
Planning concerns	8
Waste of money	6
More face to face engagement	3
Problems accessing internet	3
Targeting people	3
Avoiding holidays and elections	2
Issue with term 'customers'	2
Avoid politics	1
Other engagement methods	1
Consultation bias	1
Include planning applications	1
What happened to citizens panels?	1
Already policy?	1
Use email more	1
Webcast council meetings	1
Involvement of parish and town councils	1
Consultation undemocratic	1
CLlr involvement	1
Consultation fatigue	1
Survey application	1

To teeth out the detail of these comments, we have reported on the most common themes shown in grey on the table and described them below. Where appropriate, we have provided an officer response.

### SUPPORTIVE STATEMENTS

We noted 30 comments that were supportive of the policy. Most of these people said the policy seemed to be sensible or appropriate and should be welcomed in principle.

*All sounds very sensible and practical (39671891)*

*Seems to be a good step forward (39637929)*

*It would appear that time has been taken to produce a well thought out charter (40319097)*

*I think it's fair and encompasses the needs of all interested parties (39713012)*

### ACT ON CONSULTATION OUTCOMES

For some people, support for the policy is conditional on an understanding that the council responds and acts upon the views expressed in any consultation or engagement activity.

*Can only do good for residents and business, voluntary and community groups to be consulted on [...] provided that their responses are taken care of (40319232)*

*It is important to ensure that [...] the outcomes of the actions affected by the consultations are clear (40318692)*

*The question is not so much about the consultation but on whether the councils listen and respond to the results of such consultation. Consultation is a "statutory" responsibility [but] no attention whatsoever is required by way of a response (40325660)*

Other people noted their experience of previous engagement where they felt the council did not listen to them or others they know.

*I meet hundreds of local people who tell me that their needs and views are not considered and acted upon. A lot of people have told me they have no faith in democracy and consultations, charters or surveys of any kind are meaningless (40633392)*

One respondent said they would like to be notified about the outcomes of consultations.

*You will presumably notify us when the results of any consultations are available on the web site. We don't want to continually look and find they are not there yet (39689807)*

#### **Officer response**

The charter outlines a commitment to “understand *and respond* to the needs and views of our customers” (p2, emphasis added). On page 3 it stresses a requirement for officers to consider and act on the outcomes of any engagement activity. To make sure this happens, the policy states “we will speak to people early enough for their comments to influence our plans. We will avoid engaging customers for the sake of it, and not ask for people’s views on outcomes that have been predetermined (or where there are already very clear reasons for pursuing a particular course of action)”. The policy also says we will publish the outcomes of engagement activities on our website, detailing “what people told us and any decisions the council has made in response. Where we have not been able to act on the needs or views of our customers, this will be explained” (p6).

Officers are therefore satisfied the policy provides a guarantee that responses to consultations and engagement activities are considered and acted upon. However, this does not mean that we can accommodate everyone’s wishes. In any engagement exercise a range of different needs, views and expectations can be expressed by people. It is the responsibility of the council to consider these responses and use this information to inform the work we do. The councils employ a consultation officer who supports colleagues to analyse and interpret data gathered and draws attention to the key themes which emerge.

#### **PRESENTATION OF POLICY DOCUMENT/ CLEAR COMMUNICATION**

Some respondents welcomed the charter’s proposal that the councils use plain English when communicating any consultation or engagement activity



*Plain English should be the norm in all council communications (40482472)*

*Any proposals or questions posed need to be simple and concise (39597279)*

In a similar vein, comments were made on the wording of the proposed policy document. Some people praised the way it was written.

*This policy reads well and I found it quite clear (40318057)*

*Good to read plain English (40318179)*

And others felt that it could be better presented

*I agree that it's important to have a policy to communicate with people; however I would hope that your idea of 'plain English' is better than your draft document, which is badly expressed and punctuated (39603629)*

*It is very wordy and not very eye catching or inspiring. Will there be more accessible versions of the policy developed so that the public, especially young people, can more easily absorb the information? (40494792)*

Specifically, two people felt use of the term 'customer' was inappropriate or misleading.

*Please avoid the use of jargon e.g. "Customer Experience". This conflicts with principal 4 - using plain English! (40318692)*

*We are not customers, you are not a service. We are all residents of SODC whether we are a business residing here, or a group of residing here, or a private home owner/renter (40632773)*

#### **Officer response**

We are pleased people welcome the policy's commitment to use plain English.

To make sure the policy conforms to this commitment, it has been proof read by officers in the communications team and minor changes to the wording have been made to improve readability.

Officers also agree the term 'customer' is inappropriate in the context of this policy as the engagement activities defined are not necessary transactional by nature. We have therefore recommended references to 'customer' are replaced with 'public' or members of the public as we feel this more accurately describes the different types of people we wish to engage.

#### **PLANNING CONCERNS**

Eight people drew comparison between the proposals in the Customer Engagement Charter and their experience of the planning service. Examples were given where it was felt the council had not previously listened to the concerns of residents when making planning decisions.

*Rightly or wrongly I can't see anything that would address the views of many on our village who think that The Vale just ignore the residents of Kingston Bagpuize and Southmoor. The continued building of more and more houses*

*has changed the village dramatically and to many of us it seems that there is no thought about infrastructure. If it has been considered then why haven't we been told about the considerations and the rationale for decisions to do nothing (39777155)*

In this regard, it was felt that more could be done to improve planning consultation and engagement.

*Councils need to engage more actively with planning concerns and knowledge expressed by residents and less ready to brush them aside (40059208)*

*The perception has always been that a lot of decisions get made or discussed behind closed doors and often the people most affected by plans don't get privy or their input is not fully appreciated. A particular concern from my point of view as a resident living in Faringdon is that proper planning and thought be put in about the influx and requirement of housing. [...] Giving more say and consultation would be a great benefit and possibly lead to less barriers from people (40118251)*

#### **Officer response**

We have noted concerns about public engagement in planning decisions and relayed them to the planning service for consideration.

Although the planning service is bound by the commitments expressed in this policy, the councils Statement of Community Involvement sets out more detailed procedures which set out how people can make comments on planning applications and planning policy proposals. This policy is currently out for consultation, available from [https://consult.southandvale.gov.uk/portal/vale/planning/pol/sci/statement\\_of\\_community\\_involvement\\_consultation\\_2016](https://consult.southandvale.gov.uk/portal/vale/planning/pol/sci/statement_of_community_involvement_consultation_2016)

#### **WASTE OF MONEY**

A comment made by a small number of respondents who disagreed with the charter was that consultation and engagement activities are unnecessary and/or a waste of money.

*Is this another level of unnecessary bureaucracy (40632544)*

*Complete waste of time and tax payers money (39604617)*

However, two people expressed the need for there to be some moderation to the proposed activity to ensure public money is not wasted.

*As long as the council aren't wasting money on this (39657941)*

*You should consult us but you should not waste time/money consulting on everything or go over the top (39930214)*

**Officer response**

The councils value public engagement because it can help us to understand and respond to the needs and expectations of people and groups in the districts. This can result in better targeted services which may in turn reduce costs.

The policy advocates 'proportionality' when undertaking any engagement exercise, "we will make sure that the type and scale of engagement activity is proportionate to the task in hand, as well as any potential impact on residents, businesses and community and voluntary organisations. If something is particularly important or controversial we will consider using a combination of methods to speak to a wide range of customers. For more procedural or minor issues, we will adopt a light touch approach". Officers are of the view the policy therefore provides sufficient safeguards to prevent public money from being wasted on this type of activity.

## HOW WE HAVE USED RESULTS OF THE CONSULTATION

We would like to thank everyone that responded to this consultation.

Officers reviewed all comments made and responses to specific points shown are detailed in this summary report.

We are pleased that the majority of respondents are in favour of the charter and have therefore made a recommendation to council leaders to adopt it as policy subject to the following amendments:

- Change of title to 'Public Engagement Charter'
- Updated reference to the councils' corporate plans which have been renewed for the period 2016-2020.
- Minor textual and presentational changes to aid readability

Once agreed, the policy will be published on the councils' websites and will be used by officers to support future public engagement exercises.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

For information about the consultation or the results presented in this report, please contact:

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Corporate Strategy

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# APPENDIX A – CONSULTATION WORDING

## Introduction

We are proposing to renew our policy which sets out how we consult and engage residents, businesses, and groups from the voluntary and community sector.

Our Customer Engagement Charter was first published in 2014. It explains why, when and how we will speak to our customers. Key commitments include; speaking to people early enough for their comments to influence our plans, targeting groups likely to be affected by service changes and feeding back the outcomes of consultations.

To make sure the policy remains up to date and in line with current government guidance, we have revised the charter to make it easier to read and made a couple of minor additions, including:

- A requirement that formal consultations avoid election periods
- A requirement that consultations and engagement activities be communicated in plain English

The proposed policy is the same for both councils.

Download here:

[South Oxfordshire Customer Engagement Charter 2016-2020 \(Draft\)](#)

[Vale of White Horse Customer Engagement Charter 2016-2020 \(Draft\)](#)

## How to respond to this consultation

We would like to know what you think about our proposed policy.

You can complete our survey by clicking 'next' below. If you prefer, we are happy to provide paper forms for completion on request. Please contact us if you wish to arrange this.

The consultation closes midnight, Wednesday 28 June.

## What happens next?

We will look at all responses to this consultation to see if any changes need to be made to the policy before it gets agreed.

A summary of the consultation will be published on the [South Oxfordshire](#) and [Vale of White Horse](#) websites. This will detail our response to the main points and issues raised.

## Further information

Corporate Consultation Officer

Policy & Partnerships

South Oxfordshire District Council & The Vale of White Horse District Council

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Phone: 01235 422154

## Your views

How far do you agree or disagree with the proposed Customer Engagement Charter?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you have any comments on the proposed policy?

## About you

Which district do you live in?

- South Oxfordshire
- Vale of White Horse
- Neither South Oxfordshire nor Vale of White Horse

## Further contact

Would you like to hear from us in the future?

- I am happy for the councils to get in touch about the comments I have made
- I would like to be kept informed about other consultations undertaken by the councils

## Contact details

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_