Consultation and engagement strategy 2022 - 2025

Foreword

Following the local elections in May 2021, the Oxfordshire Fair Deal Alliance formed to lead the county council. Our vision is to lead positive change by working in partnership to make Oxfordshire a greener, fairer and healthier county. Nine priorities have been created to deliver this aim, which will form the foundations of a new strategic plan for the council.

As part of 'playing our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy', and 'tackling inequalities in Oxfordshire', the county council has made a commitment to taking decisions in an open and inclusive way. This marks the start of a new longer-term approach to consultation and engagement, which aims to engage with and listen to residents and other partners in a more active and inclusive way.

The council's new consultation and engagement strategy outlines this new approach, putting residents at the heart of decision-making to support strong, active and inclusive communities. It includes examples of best practice and the guiding principles for participation in all consultation or engagement activities.

As always, we are open to listening and look forward to hearing from all our communities across Oxfordshire.

Councillor Glynis Phillips
Cabinet Member for Corporate Services

Overall approach

1. The council is strongly committed to improving its approach to how it consults and engages with its residents and diverse communities. That includes actively listening to what residents value most, involving them in conversations about the things that affect them and using this feedback to help shape or improve services – both in design and delivery.

2. Oxfordshire County Council's consultation and engagement approach will build on good practice both within the council and outside. The overall council vision is to create a range of opportunities that expand the council's broadcast communications to conversations and two-way engagement. For consultation and engagement activities, these opportunities will ensure the council is inclusive, widening its reach to hear from and listen to diverse communities and audiences. A core focus is listening to what local people say and what really matters to them. This requires a whole organisational response and commitment.

3. This is in addition to continuing to meet more standard requirements for regular consultations, for example highway public notices, planning applications and traffic regulation orders.

4. **Consultation and engagement goals:**

   a. Expand from broadcast communications to two-way engagement and active listening.
   b. Grow and widen the council's audience reach[1] using digital channels that offer opportunities for more people to have their say and for quality engagement in multiple ways.
   c. Be inclusive when seeking the views of residents; this includes reaching the seldom-heard or hard to reach[2] such as young people, vulnerable adults and those who are digitally excluded[3].
   d. Demonstrate where the council has taken the views of consultees into account in its decision-making.

5. This will be achieved by providing a range of ways that residents can have their say, across multiple channels, both on and offline. This will include using new methodologies and being more proactive, going to the places where residents and wider stakeholders[4] are, particularly to gather the views of those seldom-heard, rather than expecting them to come to the council. Approaches and use of methodologies can evolve and develop over the short and the long-term.

Building the foundations

6. To meet the short-term improvement challenge, two key pieces of work are key:
   a. Embed and develop the use of a new digital consultation and engagement platform across the council.
   b. Refresh the council's best practice consultation and engagement guidance.

A new digital consultation and engagement platform

7. 'Let's Talk Oxfordshire' is the council's new digital consultation and engagement platform, which offers multiple digital ways of engaging and

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[1] Audience reach is the number of individuals that see a message or communication.

[2] Seldom-heard or hard to reach audiences refers to underrepresented people who use or might use public services but are difficult to engage in public discussion so their needs or views less likely to be heard by professionals or decision-makers.

[3] Digitally excluded people can lack skills, confidence and motivation, along with having limited or no access to online equipment and connectivity.

[4] Stakeholders refer to individuals or groups who may have an interest in council decisions or activities.

consulting people, including map tools; ideas forums/boards; discussion groups; surveys; quality data analysis; as well as a modern, mobile responsive and accessible web presence.

8. Content on the site needs to be developed and grow and service leads need to be trained in its use. The communications, engagement and marketing team will lead this training and will maintain oversight as the 'superusers[5]' and champions of best practice. The platform will help the council grow its online audiences and, together when integrating with existing and new channels, will help to deliver dynamic[6] tailored news and consultation and engagement opportunities of interest to residents.

A refresh of the council's best practice consultation and engagement guidance

9. A refresh of the council's best practice consultation and engagement guidance is required for staff and leaders to support the change in its consultation and engagement approach and the use of Let's Talk Oxfordshire. This will include a workflow outlining responsibilities and timescales as well as any protocols and processes to help guide.

10. The guidance will also make the distinction between different types, scales and levels of consultation, from the controversial, sensitive, complex and/or statutory (for example transport schemes or proposals on services for children with special educational needs and disabilities) – which require simultaneous management of dialogue methods as well as significant internal and external communications support – to smaller or non-statutory consultations.

11. As the professional leads, the communications, marketing and engagement team will continue to champion and advise on best practice standards and commitments when planning consultation and engagement activity. However, a new wider commitment to these standards needs to be upheld by the leadership team and the whole organisation. This will mark a new approach.

12. **So what is consultation and engagement?** The terms consultation, involvement and engagement are often used interchangeably. All three are about listening to the views of local people to shape services, develop policy or take action. Yet, they serve distinct functions. The Consultation Institute helps define these for us.

    a. **What is consultation?** Consultation is the process of dynamic dialogue between individuals or groups, based on a genuine exchange of views and with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action. It is best suited when **there is a decision to be made**.

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[5] A superuser is someone who uses a computer system with special privileges needed to administer and maintain the system.

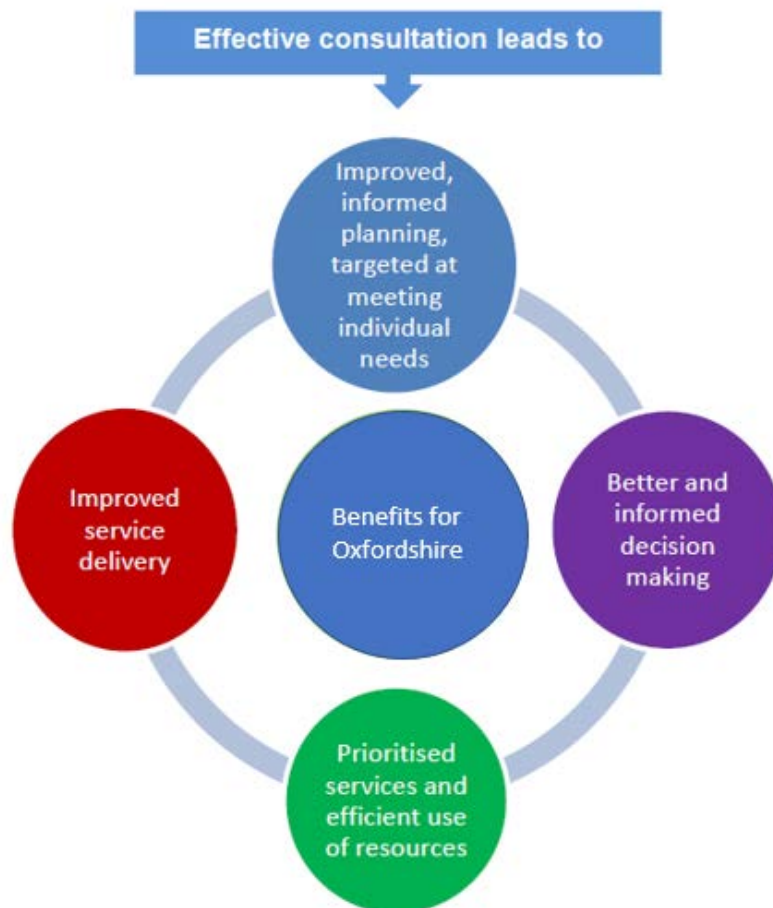[6] Dynamic news is where content changes and is personalised based on people's online interactions.

b. **What is engagement?** Engagement can be defined as actions or processes taken or undertaken to establish effective relationships with individuals or groups so that more specific interactions can then take place. Engagement activity can be useful and insightful to help develop proposals before a formal consultation takes place. It is best suited for **fostering effective relationships.**

c. **What is involvement?** Involvement is the effective interaction between planners, decision makers and stakeholders to identify issues and exchange views on a continuous basis. It is best suited for when **there is an issue to discuss.**

13. Consultation is an important aspect of the council's work helping to shape priorities and deliver benefits to its communities. Given the wide-ranging areas of work the council engages in, it is essential that the council listens to its residents and wider stakeholders and act on what they say to make improvements and be held accountable for decisions.

14. To make a decision about improving or changing a service, the council needs to be confident the decision is properly informed by public opinion and its key stakeholders. It is important that all council officers think clearly and understand the reasons behind the following commonly asked questions: Why consult? When to consult? When not to consult? The guidance will build on the following:

Why consult?	When to consult?	When not to consult?
To establish the priorities of communities and stakeholders.	When there is a statutory duty to consult with service users i.e. where the provision of a service is statutory or when considering making a significant change to that service.	Where room for manoeuvre is so limited, either by statutory or budgetary restrictions, that there is little real decision-making that the consultation can inform.
To co-design[7] and develop solutions to problems.		
To monitor and measure satisfaction with services.	When an inclusive dialogue is needed between individuals or groups to exchange views to influence a decision.	Where the council has already consulted on the same issue, or where the same groups of people/organisations have recently been approached with a sufficiently similar consultation exercise.
To establish the strength of support for a proposed service, policy or course of action.		
To listen and understand individual preferences where a range of options may be available.		Where the issue should or could be resolved without needing to consult.

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[7] A method where decision-making is shared equally throughout the process.

Effective consultation leads to

Improved, informed planning, targeted at meeting individual needs

Improved service delivery

Benefits for Oxfordshire

Better and informed decision making

Prioritised services and efficient use of resources

15. The council's standards and commitments will also be upheld against the following principles:

    a. **The Gunning principles:** The principles are a set of rules for public consultation that were proposed in 1985 by Stephen Sedley QC and accepted by the judge in the Gunning v London Borough of Brent court case about a consultation for a school closure. A supreme court case in 2014 endorsed the legal standing of the principles. Since then, they form a strong legal foundation from which the legitimacy of public consultations is assessed. They consist of four rules, which, if followed, are designed to make consultation fair, legitimate and a worthwhile exercise:

        1. Consultation must be at a time when proposals are still at a formative stage. A final decision has not yet been made, or predetermined, by the decision makers.

        2. There is sufficient information provided, including the reasons for proposals, to allow for intelligent consideration and response. The information provided must relate to the consultation and

must be available, accessible and easily interpretable for consultees to provide an informed response.

3. There is adequate time for people to consider a proposal, participate and respond. The length of time given for consultee to respond can vary depending on the subject and extent of impact of the consultation.

4. Conscientious consideration must be given to the consultation responses before a decision is made. Decision-makers should be able to provide evidence that they took consultation responses into account.

b. **Equal access and inclusion**: Having clear communications and engagement plans to support activity is key, with an assessment of the best channels and methods to reach target audiences. Service leads will be responsible for equality impact assessments to support consultation proposals, which will inform the development of these plans, taking account of audiences with protected characteristics[8], those for whom English is a second language and those who may be digitally excluded.

As a minimum standard, the council will consider housing printed copies of consultation surveys in libraries and other relevant public-facing buildings and will offer access to alternative formats – eg Braille, Easy Read or interpretation services. The council is committed to using plain English in all its consultations.

c. **Engagement methodologies:** Guided by the council's communications, marketing and engagement team, the council will start to explore wider tools and ways of gathering feedback from or involving residents in service delivery. This will be assessed as part of the development of communications and engagement plans to support activity, recognising that surveys may not be the only route, or the best route to engage.

This will form part of both a short-term and long-term commitment to provide a wide range of opportunities for people to engage with the council in a more inclusive way. Some activity may stand alone from formal consultations but could be a tool to then use for them.

d. **Timeframes:** Supporting Gunning principle 3, best guidance examples of timeframes will be outlined in the council's refreshed consultation and engagement guidance covering major service changes and statutory consultations to smaller non-statutory activities seeking views.

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[8] The Equality Act 2010 protects us all by making it against the law to discriminate against or harass someone because of a protected characteristic. There are nine protected characteristics: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation.

Changes during the planning phase of a consultation may cause delays to the timeline, which may impact the outcomes that can be delivered. Consultation timelines should not be compressed to meet the council's Cabinet dates and deadlines, or other decision-making meetings, but designed around best practice and the best ways to reach audiences.

It is also key to avoid audience consultation fatigue where too many consultations with the same people result in disengagement – timing and channel prioritisation are important considerations when planning.

e. **Consultation feedback/results:** Providing feedback is key to having and maintaining an ongoing two-way conversation and engagement with residents. Feedback and results must inform decision-making and be published with a clear summary for the 'You said, we did' section of Let's Talk Oxfordshire.

f. **Knowledge, understanding and relationships with communities:** Communities need to be segmented beyond geography to how they self-define (for example, families and their networks; commuters, visitors and communities of interest eg faith groups, recreational etc). This understanding needs to be recognised as constantly emerging and changing – the council will never have a fixed understanding, as communities are fluid.

Training and support

16. A staff training and support programme will be implemented to support the council's commitment to more active listening and engagement and the rollout of Let's Talk Oxfordshire. As part of this, the communications, marketing and engagement team will look to train staff within council service departments and create a network to promote best practice across the council. The remit of the network and their connection to the communications, marketing and engagement team would need to be clear and not just focused on online consultation processes and the support and use of Let's Talk Oxfordshire.

17. The communications, marketing and engagement team will provide quality co-ordination, oversight and an overarching communications and engagement approach. It will advise, guide, support and facilitate action, as well as deliver accompanying campaigns or publicity activity.

18. The council's insights team will play an active role in providing behavioural insight so that consultations and community engagement projects can be more targeted and appropriate.

19. All these actions will help the council improve consistency of standards and approach towards consultation and engagement activity and facilitate two-way engagement.

Two-way conversations, expanding reach and being inclusive

Oxfordshire Conversations

20. To support the new approach, the council will introduce a series of engagement events that will offer opportunities for residents to hear from and ask questions of members of the council's Cabinet. Events will be themed but will include an element of an open question and answer session to allow for conversations on wider issues that matter most to residents.

21. These events will be inclusive to all, offering people the greatest choice to access these conversations both face to face (COVID permitting), online or hybrid – a mixture of both. Events will both enable those who are digitally excluded and those who might be physically or mentally excluded[9] to participate.

New methodologies and tools

22. The council uses a range of community engagement tools, including surveys and discussion groups. The council will start to introduce, where appropriate, a wider set of tools that will facilitate a shift away from a 'transmit' approach to having a two-way dialogue.

23. This may include using peer research, citizens' juries and appreciative inquiry. Existing community networks and volunteer groups can also be built upon, working with the council's district, city, health, education and business partners. A collaboration with a key partner, such as Healthwatch, could be considered.

    a. **Peer research** is where community members are recruited, trained and supported to carry out research and consultation within their own community networks. It is a collaborative approach, where organisations and local people work together for the common good. All parties achieve a better understanding of alternative perspectives and relationships are enhanced by working collectively.

    b. **Appreciative inquiry** is a methodology that systematically facilitates individuals and groups to define, agree and then build on what is good and effective within their organisations and communities. It involves facilitation through a four-step process, which is based on focusing on the strengths and assets of people and communities as well as their needs.

    c. **Citizens' juries** involve specially recruited members of the public (around 12 - 16 people), researchers and policy makers coming face to face to deliberate research, policy evidence and expert opinion over a

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[9] There are some people who are digitally included but who find it difficult to attend events face to face due to social or economic factors or physical disabilities. Some may lack the confidence or may have a mental illness that makes it challenging for them to physically participate in public events.

three or four-day period. In relation to a specific policy issue of public importance, citizens are supported to pose questions to, and engage in debate with, policy makers and experts and then to reach a decision and/or set of recommendations.

    d. **Co-production** is where citizens are involved in the creation of public policies and services. The council has a number of existing co-production groups in children and adult services and can utilise them to jointly develop, design and contribute towards a service change or proposal.

25. Some of these new methodologies will help to ensure the council is offering a wide range of opportunities to engage residents, including those whose voices are not always harnessed and heard.

26. Councillors also play a key part here in providing key intelligence for how local people and communities are viewed and how best to reach them.

27. Methodologies will be chosen depending on the type of engagement, consultation or involvement required (as outlined in paragraph 14) and level of participation desired based on an assessment of need. The use of more than one methodology is achievable and possible depending on the target audience(s).

28. This will be outlined within supporting communications and engagement plans for engagement and consultation exercises.

29. The table on page 10 builds on and outlines Roger Hart's ladder of participation from broadcast sharing of information to empowerment. It shows the various participation levels within this range and people's ability to influence decision-making or change within them. It also gives examples of methodologies. To note some of the same methodologies can be used for different participation levels.

Participation types, influence and methodology examples

Level	Mode	Ability to influence	Definition	Examples
Insight	One-way	None	Gathering data and published information to inform communication, engagement and consultation plans with no channel provided for feedback.	Census, JSNA, lifestyle data sets, published research etc.
Information	One-way	None	Transmitting information, with no channel provided for feedback.	Media release, website, newsletter, poster etc.
Engagement	Two-way	Limited	Inviting views and sharing experiences, with the objective of gaining insight to help develop ideas, proposals and programmes of action. It can also be used to build longer-term relationships to enable views to be exchanged on an ongoing basis.	Forums, network meetings, quick polls, workshops, events, participation and discussion groups etc.
Consultation	Two-way	Limited	Ask and listen to people to influence decisions, policies or programmes of action.	Polls and surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, online ideas boards, digital mapping tools, citizen juries etc.
Collaboration and coproduction	Dialogue based	Moderate	Working together for a defined and common purpose such as identifying issues, delivering actions, and making decisions together	Peer research, co-design work, appreciative enquiry, recruitment, commissioning and evaluation panels etc.
Empowerment	Dialogue based	Full control	Organise events for citizens, place the full decision-making power in their hands and implement what they decide.	Citizen proposals, community-run committees

Building the council's online audiences

28. Work to review and map the council's existing networks and community groups and establishing a single stakeholder database (compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation) has already begun by the communications, marketing and engagement team as part of its strategy to grow the council's online audiences. This includes separating audiences by areas of interests and being able to provide individuals with targeted and tailored e-newsletter content – news, information and consultation or engagement activities of interest. Let's Talk Oxfordshire will offer another opportunity for audience growth, integrating with the council's online newsletter platform.

Partnership working

29. The council will build on existing partnerships and networks that are facilitated and supported by the council – for example the districts and city, health (and Healthwatch), business and academic institutes – to expand the number of channels that the council can use to reach people.

30. Partner agencies, in particular health, also have integrated community engagement approaches (eg participation groups) and these could be harnessed to expand the council's audience reach and develop effective joint working. The council will also ensure it works closely with town and parish councils, as well as councillor networks, to enhance hyperlocal[10] engagement, particularly with people that are harder to reach. This will make engagement more accessible for local people.

31. The council will also ensure it continues to work closely with voluntary groups and partners. The Oxfordshire Compact (2004)[11] includes a consultation code that sets out ways in which statutory agencies and voluntary and community sector organisations should consult with one another in relation to:
    a. Effective consultation as a key part of the policy-making process.
    b. People's views shaping policies and setting the agenda for better services.
    c. Consultation as a two-way process in which all are equal partners, and both statutory and voluntary and community sector organisations have duties and responsibilities when consulting or being consulted with.
    d. Taking all reasonable steps to ensure that the processes and procedures are as inclusive as possible.

32. The council is currently coproducing a new voluntary and community sector strategy with the sector for agreement later in 2022. The aim of the strategy is to reiterate its commitment to the voluntary and community sector and to ensure all parties are appropriately aligned with each other. As part of the new

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[10] Relating to or focused on matters concerning a small community or geographical area.
[11] A non-legal partnership agreement between statutory bodies, such as local authorities and the NHS, together with voluntary, community and faith organisations to work more effectively together for the people of Oxfordshire.

strategy, the ambition is to include a review of the Oxfordshire Compact, which will be coproduced both internally and with the sector.

Listening to the voices of young people

33. Children and young people (aged 0 - 17) make up one in five of Oxfordshire's population. The council has been proactive for many years in ensuring the voice, rights and responsibilities of children and young people are central to what the council does, using a variety of approaches to involve young people. Youth voice and youth participation is built into service delivery across children's services.

34. The current consultation and engagement opportunities for children and young people include: the Children in Care Council; the Voice of Oxfordshire's Youth (VOXY) – a countywide forum that provides a voice for young people to make decisions about matters that affect change; interview, commissioning and evaluation panels; oxme.info – a website for young people, which provides work experience opportunities; and topic and service-specific consultations.

35. Following a review of VOXY (May 2021), the council will aim to widen the reach of young people engaged and increase the overall diversity of children and young people the council hears from. This includes developing insight so that the council better understands its audiences; building stronger relationships with Children in Care Council, service areas, school councils, partners and the voluntary sector so it can reach more children and young people; creating a virtual youth opportunities network on Let's Talk Oxfordshire; reintroducing topic-specific sounding boards; and working with oxme.info and activitiesoxfordshire.info to target the promotion of youth voice opportunities and to cascade findings and actions.

Monitoring progress and review

36. The success at engaging with and listening to residents and other partners in a more active and inclusive way will be measured through a range of metrics.

37. The council will review the consultation and engagement strategy annually and publish an update against its key priorities and actions on the consultations – have your say pages of the county council website oxfordshire.gov.uk/consultation.

38. The council will report on key performance measures in the communications, marketing and engagement team's quarterly monitoring reports and will provide opportunities for residents, communities, councillors, consultees, and engagement participants to give their feedback to improve the council's performance.

39. A summary of actions for 2022 to 2023 is set out below. This has been extracted from a detailed action plan that has been developed, which focuses

on building the right foundations, enabling two-way conversations, expanding the council's reach and being inclusive.

Building the right foundations

Priorities	Actions
Embed and develop the use of a new digital consultation and engagement platform 'Let's talk Oxfordshire' across the council	Develop protocols and best practice standards for Let's Talk Oxfordshire by the end of March 2022.
Refresh the council's best practice consultation and engagement guidance	Establish new protocols and workflows for best practice consultation and engagement, upholding the council's commitment to the Gunning Principles, by the end of March 2022. Deliver a refreshed online consultation and engagement guidance document and toolkit and update any webpages by end of March 2022, including best practice advice on effectively including young people, the seldom heard and digitally excluded people.
Maximise the value of council professionals to support effective consultation and engagement.	Create a network of staff who have key responsibilities for consultation and engagement by the end of March 2022. Work collaboratively across communications, strategy and insight to support key service area led strategic consultations and engagement activities by providing specialist advice, data and behavioural insights, quality co-ordination and oversight, timely and effective campaign or publicity activity and effective data analysis and reporting, supporting a minimum of six exercises during 2022/23.
Offer new training and support opportunities	Develop and roll out new in-house training on best practice consultation and engagement, targeting the staff network initially and offering a minimum of four training sessions in 2022/23 and a lightning talk for all staff by the end of March 2022. Develop new in-house training for Let's Talk Oxfordshire, running a minimum of four sessions in 2022/23.

Enabling two-way conversations

Priorities	Actions
Introduce new public engagement opportunities for people to hear from and ask questions of the council's Cabinet.	Launch a trial of Oxfordshire Conversations events with a view to running an annual series of conversations both face to face (COVID permitting), online or hybrid – a mixture of both. Specific focus will be given to offering choice and supporting equality of access and inclusion.
Introduce a wider set of tools that will facilitate a shift away from a 'transmit' approach to consultation to having a two-way dialogue	Trial at least one of the new methodologies listed in the strategy in 2022/23 (eg appreciative enquiry, peer research etc), according to business need. Ensure at least 10 per cent of projects on Let's Talk Oxfordshire use at least one of the new engagement tools the platform offers by the end of 2022/23.
Widen the reach and overall diversity of young people engaged	Build even stronger relationships with the council's Children in Care Council, youth offer, service areas, school councils, partners and the voluntary sector to reach more children and young people from January 2022. Deliver three sounding board events during 2022/23 to provide deep dive opportunities for children and young people on themed issues identified by the council.
Support open and transparent decision-making	Introduce a new 'you said, we did' section to Let's Talk Oxfordshire by the end of March 2022.

Expanding the council's reach and being inclusive

Priorities	Actions
Build the council's online audiences	Work across the communications, marketing, and engagement team to sign-up 15,000 new users to Let's Talk Oxfordshire in 2022/23. Provide individuals with monthly GDPR-compliant targeted and tailored e-newsletter content – news, information and consultation or engagement activities of interest.
Focus on including everyone, by supporting equal access and inclusion in consultation and engagement practice	Starting with key service area led strategic consultations, have clear communications and engagement plans for exercises, which take account of insight and understanding about audience groups, including how communities self-define, those with protected characteristics and those who may be digitally excluded. Work with libraries and other public facing buildings to provide and promote engagement and consultation opportunities to digitally excluded from January 2022. Work with customer services to support customer requests for the provision of materials in alternative formats eg Braille, Easy Read, interpretation or translation services from January 2022. Use partnership networks even more effectively to make consultation engagement more accessible for target audiences, including seldom heard groups and digitally excluded, from January 2022.