

Sheffield City Council

Foundations for Good Engagement

Part 1
July 2024

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How to use this document

These Foundations are aimed at the whole of the Council, at helping officers and services to think through how we engage with Sheffield residents so that they get a consistent experience whichever part of the organisation they are working with. It sets out a baseline level of expectations to ensure we are doing the fundamentals well.

This document is constructed around a set of prompt questions for officers, designed to guide their thinking as they are developing a piece of engagement work. It also sets out a set of questions and considerations for senior officers, to help ensure that support for officers doing engagement, and use of the outputs from that work, are built into service, directorate and organisational structures, processes and ways of working.

It is written for a general audience, rather than for experienced engagement specialists, though the latter may still find it a useful reference guide. It is intended to be a living document that develops over time as the Council refines its approach.

What support is available?

We have established a Community of Practice for officers working on engagement with and in communities. This group acts to share good practice across the organisation through showcases, and as a source of advice and support to those grappling with specific challenges in their work. You can find out more about the Community of Practice by contacting the Equalities and Engagement Team at equalitiesandengagement@sheffield.gov.uk.

Following the agreement of these Foundations, we will be building a learning and development offer to support engagement work, with the Community of Practice involved to co-design this, to ensure it is rooted in what officers need.

Key Contact Points for further advice and support

Equalities and Engagement Team

equalitiesandengagement@sheffield.gov.uk

Youth Voice and Influence Team

youth.voice@sheffield.gov.uk

Context and Purpose

Engagement covers a broad range of activity, from broadcasting information, to consultation, through to active involvement, collaboration, and co-production. As the LGA note in their New Conversations Guide, as well as telling people what is happening and asking them what they think about it, engagement can also “be about working with the community to design campaigns or interventions or about asking for action and involvement. At other points it will mean seeking insight into what local people think and feel. It increasingly involves using digital technologies, and seeks to make services more responsive to residents’ needs.”

High quality engagement is critical to the Council serving the city well. Without it, those running services will not have the insight they need to deliver them according to people’s needs and a changing population; we will lack the knowledge to make capital investments that reflect what people want for their areas of Sheffield and support the city to grow sustainably; and we will make it harder for citizens, communities and businesses to help shape the key policies and plans we have to put in place to guide the development of the city over the coming years. As importantly, there are areas where we have statutory requirements to consult, and it is essential we do this well and with the [Gunning Principles](#) in mind.

Engagement is also vital for building residents’ trust in us as an organisation. With this in mind, we have to approach our work with the understanding that when we engage or consult we are seen as representing the whole Council, not just one service or area of work. We need to build a true One Council approach as a result.

These Foundations are aimed at supporting officers to consider the issues they need to in order to design and deliver effective engagement, and to set out our organisational expectations around structures and processes to support officers in this work and ensure engagement properly informs and shapes the policies and proposals we bring forward for services and places. It is a living document intended to develop over time as we build our approach.

Foundation 1: Capacity-building for Engagement

Why is this important?

Engagement should not be seen as something additional to the day job – it is integral to and delivering our duties well, and we need to dedicate time and resource to getting it right. We also need to recognise that it involves a set of skills that may well be different to those necessary to deliver a given service, and that officers will have training and experience in as a result.

This means that we need to be aware that where engagement is part of their role, officers need to be equipped to do it well, with appropriate learning and development. We also need to recognise that there will be untapped officer talent that could do this work well if we can support them.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key messages about capacity-building
<p>You've been asked to run an engagement exercise:</p> <p>How confident are you in doing this? What skills do you have and what support or development might you need?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who else might be able to provide help or support to you as you begin to plan? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do those leading engagement work have the time and resource to do engagement well? Do those leading engagement have the skills and confidence needed? What processes or ways of working might need to be changed to allow good quality engagement to take place? 	<p>The most important resource for engagement is time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time to plan engagement so it's as early as possible and reaches all the groups it needs to reach Time for officers to develop the skills, confidence and training needed Time to engage with others who may be able to refine ideas or reduce the risk of duplication

Foundation 2: Being clear about the scope and purpose

Why is this important?

Clarity on the scope and purpose of an engagement exercise is essential for setting expectations, especially in relation to what will be available for discussion and change. If we are not clear about this, then those we are engaging with won't be either, and we risk undermining trust when expectations aren't met.

This means we need to be clear about what the engagement covers, and what it doesn't. We need to avoid conflating different types of engagement (for example consultation on a final proposal with limited room for changes to be made, versus open engagement at the start of a development process). The scope and purpose of engagement is also relevant for shaping the approach we take, and for ensuring we don't repeat engagement that's already been done.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key message about scope and purpose
<p>Page 162</p> <p>What are you engaging about? Is it a specific proposal/subject? Are you building understanding of more general views (e.g. to build community/citizen relationships, trust and knowledge)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you want to know from communities/ citizens? What might they want to tell us? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What requirements are there to engage (and think about the consequences of not engaging properly). • What reasonable parameters are there to the engagement (e.g. budget, legal)? NB - time should not be a limiting factor if you plan ahead. • What additional benefits or opportunities are there in engaging (e.g. to gain insights that inform other plans, priorities and decisions)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you're unclear why you're engaging, so will others be. It will undermine trust and confidence. • Be clear about what the engagement covers and what it aims to, and when and how it's taking place.

Foundation 3: Knowing the groups you need to reach

Why is this important?

Whenever we are proposing changes, there will be different sets of people who are potentially affected differently by those plans; equally, when we are seeking insight at earlier stages in a process, there will be a range of views across groups with an interest in the issue at hand. We need to ensure we are working effectively to hear the full range of views and insight: this is integral to demonstrating that the Council is delivering on its equality duties.

This means we can't just make an opportunity available and passively wait for people to respond to us: we need to proactively reach out, finding accessible ways to get representative views from different communities. We need to actively consider issues of race and culture, accessibility and other factors in designing our engagement. All this is dependent on understanding the people we need to reach.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key message about reaching different groups
<p>Page 163</p> <p>Are there specific/known groups to engage with (e.g. people using your service or living in a relevant area)? Or is your work more general (e.g. city-wide)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you sought information and insight from Elected Members? • What do you know about the communities you're engaging with? (remember these could be communities of geography, identity or interest) • Who could you connect with to find out more? more? (e.g. community organisations, LACs, other services) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What pre-existing population, community or equality analysis is available (e.g. service data monitoring, population profiles, customer information)? What might be needed to strengthen that? • How might you be able to connect to other council services, other stakeholders and organisations to add to your knowledge? • How could you involve Elected Members? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you don't identify who you need to reach, your engagement will be limited and could be challenged. • Get help and advice if you need it about your equality analysis and data – you can contact the Equalities and Engagement Team for support via equalitiesandengagement@sheffield.gov.uk. • Remember that other services/organisations may already have relationships with the groups you need to reach – get in touch with them through the Community of Practice

Foundation 4: Using existing feedback sources

Why is this important?

We need to avoid repeatedly asking people what they think about a given issue: doing so is a good way to generate consultation and engagement fatigue amongst Sheffield residents. This means we should try to use and reuse the wealth of material that has been produced through previous engagement exercises, where this is still current.

Even where we decide we do need to engage or consult with residents, the things people have already told us can shape how we approach it, or what we produce as a starting point to engage on. They can also tell us where we have gaps and help us design our engagement: we might know a lot about what one set of people think, but not much about another.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key message about existing feedback
<p>Page 164</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What feedback/insights are already available? Has your team or service previously engaged on a similar issue, and who's got that feedback? What about other services who work with similar communities or customers to yours? Or community organisations? • Can a Have Your Say Sheffield officer* help find an engagement exercise that's already been done? 	<p>Consider how to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop mechanisms to store and collate engagement feedback and other information or research so it can be used in the future too, bearing in mind information governance principles • Work with other services/ directorates to do this • Have processes to allow you to look for information already available and share your own 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making use of existing sources of information saves time and resource for your service and, more importantly, for communities/citizens. • Be wary of using information out of context or that's out of date or unrepresentative. • Get involved with other services seeking to do the same by joining the Engagement Community of Practice (contact equalitiesandengagement@sheffield.gov.uk for more information). • Work with the hub admin who covers your service area for *Have Your Say Sheffield

Foundation 5: Knowing when consultation is required

Why is this important?

There are areas of delivery where it is not just advisable to consult, but where we have a statutory duty to do so, or where residents might have a legitimate expectation that we do. It is essential that we carry out our responsibilities here, with potentially serious consequences if we don't.

There are a set of principles established through the courts that set out how to ensure consultation has been done appropriately: these are the Gunning Principles and are the key test to meet.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key messages on consultation
<p>Page 165</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you clear on whether you need to consult? Do you have a statutory duty to consult on the issue? Or is there a <i>legitimate expectation</i> that you must consult? (e.g. Your service has promised to do so or it would be unfair not to consult with people affected). • If unsure – do you know where to get advice? • Do you understand the Gunning Principles? (they're straightforward and not complicated) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you understand your statutory obligations, including when you must consult? • Are you genuinely giving enough time to allow consultation to be done properly? (time to plan, consult, allow feedback and respond). • What support does your service need on consultation? Consultation guidance or training for officers? Specific legal advice? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek advice on consultation if needed and seek it early via equalitiesandengagement@sheffield.gov.uk • Learn and share the Gunning Principles: you can find the LGA summary here • Don't conflate consultation with other forms of engagement • Don't call something consultation if it isn't

Foundation 6: Choosing the right engagement method(s)

Why is this important?

Choosing the right method is critical to enabling the inclusion of different groups, and to having accessible, representative and valid engagement. Different groups will respond in different ways, and have different needs: you will need to take account of this to be successful.

Beyond this, there is the question of what you want to achieve through your engagement. Do you want to know what people think about a given issue? Do you want gain insight into how people want their local area to develop? Do you want people to get involved in shaping or even delivering services with you? Each of these may be best addressed through a different approach.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key message about engagement methods
<p>Page 166</p> <p>What's the most accessible and appropriate way to engage with <i>the groups you need to reach</i>? On-line/digital? In-person? Combination?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What mechanisms could you use to do this? (e.g. surveys, discussion groups, workshops, open space events) • Can you enable time for more open/ideas-based engagement instead of survey-based questions? (e.g. Discussion forums, reference group?) • Think about how you are going to promote and communicate the engagement opportunity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think about how your engagement approaches can help you to be open and collaborate with the communities you serve. • Consider if you have the right resources in place to enable you to find and use different engagement methods? • How can you make use of the Have Your Say Sheffield hub admin officer role? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't just rely on surveys and proposals/ questions your service has come up – use more collaborative and open engagement with communities/citizens where possible. • The method of engagement you choose can influence the way people respond. • Seek support, advice and collaboration – invest resource in your Have Your Say Sheffield hub admin, join the Community of Practice and contact: equalitiesandengagement@sheffield.gov.uk.

Foundation 7: Using digital engagement effectively

Why is this important?

Digital engagement is an excellent route to reach lots of people, and to keep them informed and engaged in ongoing work. There are obviously risks of digital exclusion, and for this reason you should strongly consider where you might need to supplement a digital approach to ensure you reach everyone you need to.

We have invested in an excellent platform with the Council, Have Your Say Sheffield, which offers far more than traditional surveys: teams in the Council are already using it for broader communication, to support open working with stakeholders, and to facilitate two-way discussions.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key message about digital engagement
<p>Page 167</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you know who is the Have Your Say Sheffield hub admin officer that covers your service area? (They'll create an account for you so you can create online engagement exercises). Are you maximising the effectiveness and reach of the engagement tools on Have Your Say Sheffield? Can you target engagement to help reach different groups and ensure you hear the widest range of voices? (e.g. sharing links or finding ways to facilitate engagement). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How much does your service know about Have Your Say Sheffield and its tools? Do you need training/support to make better use of it? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't assume that digital engagement is always the answer and is always enough on its own - always consider other methods too based on the needs of the groups you need to engage with. Be creative about how you use Have Your Say Sheffield tools. But remember that more people are becoming digitally-enabled. Be creative about how you use Have Your Say Sheffield tools. Recognise and make use of Have Your Say Sheffield Hub Admins

Foundation 8: Planning and resourcing the engagement

Why is this important?

Engagement takes time and effort to do well, and the resource we put into it needs to reflect that. Robust planning is essential to allow you to consider risks and the kinds of issues that might arise in the course of the work, and how to accommodate or respond to them. It also allows for considering opportunities to join up and make more of Council resources, and avoid consultation fatigue for residents.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key message about planning and resourcing
<p>Page 108</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you maintaining a clear plan and timeframe for the engagement, analysis of its feedback and reporting? Can you support and incentivise people to take part (e.g. reasonable adjustments or financial recognition)? Do other services work in the area – can you join up? • Can you talk to Local Area Committee support officers about opportunities in their areas you could take advantage of? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do officers have sufficient time and resource to do engagement well (including analysis of its feedback and reporting)? • How can we invest time and training in officers to develop their engagement skills? • How could we resource support and incentives for people to take part? • How strong is your relationship with other services to encourage joint/collaborative engagement? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most important resource for engagement is time so it's as early as possible, reaches all the groups it needs to, and so that officers can develop the skills, confidence and training needed • Join-up with other services to work together, and work through LAC teams to find local opportunities

Foundation 9: Authorising and ‘owning’ the engagement

Why is this important?

Engagement work carries risks, as with any communication activity. As such it's important that there is collective agreement and endorsement of the approach for a given exercise. This also provides support to the officers doing the actual engagement work: this can be a vulnerable position to be in, and its important those doing it know they have the backing and confidence of senior leaders. In addition, a collective One Council approach is essential for consistency from the point of view of Sheffield residents.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key message about authorisation
<p>Page 169</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you got clear sign-off from your service decision-makers to develop and run the engagement exercise? • Do you know what level of involvement in the process and updates service decision-makers expect or need? (Closer oversight may be required for engagement subjects that are complicated or problematic). • Are you clear about any involvement expected from Elected Members? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you got clear processes in place for officer and Member decision-makers to own the engagement? (e.g. being accountable to the engagement exercise, being willing to adapt plans based on the feedback, ensuring that the engagement is fully completed and the outcomes communicated and visible within decisions). 	<p>Engagement exercises, once started, must be fully completed in a timely manner to ensure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrity of the process • Confidence of communities/citizens in the Council • Compliance with the Gunning Principles (if the exercise is a consultation) <p>NB – a common way for this not to happen is when feedback from an engagement exercise isn't communicated back to communities/citizens and doesn't lead to an outcome. This can undermine trust and goodwill.</p>

Foundation 10: Quality-assuring the engagement

Why is this important?

Low quality engagement can be worse than none at all, with implications for our relationship with Sheffield residents and the trust they have in us. A strong approach to quality assurance before going out to engage can address issues before they arise: we should be able to respond to critiques and change our approach as we go, but it is better to not have to.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key message about quality assurance
<p>• Do you know what support and advice is available to you to help you develop the best engagement exercise needed?</p> <p>• This might include advice about the best and most accessible engagement method, quality and clarity of wording and the information created and requirements for equality monitoring.</p> <p>• If you're not sure or if there isn't a specific point of contact in your service, contact your Have Your Say Sheffield hub admin and/or equalitiesandengagement@sheffield.gov.uk.</p>	<p>You should plan for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring quality control/approval for any engagement exercises on behalf of your service. • How you can develop advice/support skills and capacity within your service/directorate to create engagement quality controls. • How you can help to resource and make use of the Have Your Say Sheffield hub admin officer role. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment in proper quality assurance enhances community/citizen experience, access and confidence in your service. • It reduces the risk of inadequate, tokenistic or unsafe engagement exercises. • Seek support and advice – invest resource in your Have Your Say Sheffield hub admin, join the Community of Practice and contact equalitiesandengagement@sheffield.gov.uk.

Foundation 11: Monitoring and analysing the engagement/consultation

Why is this important?

The best-laid plans sometimes encounter unanticipated problems once they start being enacted; this means you shouldn't just start your engagement activity and wait for it to report, but monitor it as you go to ensure it is meeting its aims and adjust as necessary. Ongoing monitoring can also help you identify when you aren't reaching all the people you need to and plan additional activity to compensate for this.

It's also important that once the work is complete you commit to robust analysis of the outputs to ensure a full understanding of the views people have expressed. We need to properly understand what people have said and how this breaks down, for example to help us identify tensions in what people are saying so we can think about how to respond.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key message about monitoring
<p>• How successful is the engagement in reaching the groups it needs to? NB - monitoring should be in place while the exercise is still in progress to seek to address any issues.</p> <p>• Can any feedback gaps be addressed?</p> <p>• What insights are different groups providing? Equality analysis is key to this.</p> <p>• How successful overall was the exercise and the method used?</p>	<p>You need to be confident that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement outcomes are reported and discussed as part of the development and sign off of Committee Reports • DLTs should consider whether engagement and consultation is adequately reflected in reports as part of their sign off process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement exercises need to be able to show that they've taken all reasonable steps to reach a diverse audience through accessible methods. • This helps to ensure confidence in the representativeness of feedback and therefore the success of the ultimate outcome. • It also helps to demonstrate that the Council is actively seeking to reduce inequality, in-line with its legal duties.

Foundation 12: Communicating the impact of the engagement/consultation

Why is this important?

It isn't enough to ask people what they think about our proposals and make changes in response: we also need to make sure people know we've done that. If people think they have given us their time, energy and thoughts, and aren't clear we have valued that appropriately, that can lead to falling trust and lack of willingness to engage in the future.

We can't assume people know we've made changes in response to what they said: we need to make the effort to set this out clearly, both directly to participants and through the committee process.

Questions for Officers	Organisational considerations and questions for managers	Key message about communicating back
<p>Page 172</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you got a process for sharing feedback with decision-makers to help inform decisions? Have you got a plan and process for communicating outcomes back to communities/citizens, including those who took part? NB - this should be as soon as possible following the decision-making that follows the end of the engagement exercise. • Can you show and evidence how the feedback has been considered by your service in its decision-making? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you got clear processes in place for ensuring that feedback is reported properly to committees as part of the sign off process, and that the outcomes of the exercise are communicated and visible within decisions? • Are you continuing to explore options for developing community/citizen relationships and ongoing engagement methods (e.g. reference groups) to complement and support specific engagement exercises you undertake? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating outcomes back in a timely way helps to show your service's commitment to working in an open and transparent way, which places community/citizen empowerment at its heart. • Conversely, not doing so this can undermine confidence and trust, and the robustness and validity of the exercise itself.