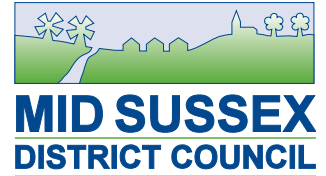


Mid Sussex

How you can get involved



Code of Practice and Statement of Community Involvement

Adopted

October 2011

This document sets out the principles by which the District Council will seek to involve residents, businesses and other local organisations in planning and other key decisions



What is the Statement of Community Involvement?

The Statement of Community Involvement describes how the Council will seek to engage with residents, businesses and other local organisations in its decision making on planning and other key matters in the District. It is for anyone interested in playing a part in improving the future of Mid Sussex.

Why is community involvement important?

The Council believes that effective and transparent community involvement can help ensure that Mid Sussex achieves its vision of being:

“A thriving and attractive District, a desirable place to live, work and visit. Our aim is to maintain, and where possible, improve the social, economic and environmental well being of our District and the quality of life for all, now and in the future”.

Mid Sussex Sustainable Communities Strategy (2008)



To achieve this vision, the Council must actively seek to understand the needs and aspirations of all the different communities across the District. This is particularly important when decisions are difficult, resources are limited and where people disagree on the best way forward. Effective and transparent community involvement will help elected Councillors balance competing pressures and make better decisions.

What is the Council's overall goal in promoting community involvement?

The Council's aim for community involvement is twofold:

“Firstly, to ensure that residents, businesses and other local organisations have the best possible opportunity to have their opinion heard to inform a proposal and the decision making process. Secondly, to ensure that they receive the results of any public consultation exercise and understand how the Council has used the views they have been given.”



This Statement recognises that some people are very active in their communities while others are more reserved about involving themselves in the Council's work or are only interested in one or two specific issues. It is important therefore that the approach taken to community involvement encourages both regular participants and the 'silent majority' to come forward on matters of concern to them.

What principles will guide community involvement?

The success of any community involvement exercise will be a result of the quality of the approach taken. On page 3 we set out six principles, which are intended as a guide to ensure the necessary quality of work is carried out. Failure to make reasonable efforts to follow these principles is likely to limit the validity and usefulness of the community involvement undertaken.

How can you get involved?

This guide is for anyone interested in helping the Council carry out its business. The Council is keen to encourage the community to express their views on matters of concern or interest to them. You can do this through the formal consultation exercises which are the subject of this guide. The Council lists the key consultation activities it is conducting on its website at www.midsussex.gov.uk/consultation.

Alternatively, you may wish to raise matters or discuss ideas with your local ward councillor at any time. They can raise matters directly with the Council or other organisations on your behalf. They can also tell you about local meetings that are happening and might be useful, as well as supporting you if you feel that consultation has not been carried out in accordance with this guide. Details of all the Mid Sussex District Council Members can be found at www.midsussex.gov.uk/council or by telephoning (01444) 477003.

The District Council believes that your local town and parish councils have a crucial role to play in obtaining the views of local people and expressing the needs and aspirations of their communities. This is particularly important on planning matters.

Similarly, the Council would like to use the publication of this Statement to encourage other organisations operating across the District to undertake effective and transparent community involvement activities themselves when they are making their own decisions that affect the quality of life of local people. For example, the Council would encourage developers, as an example of 'good neighbourliness', to carry out robust community involvement where the scale of the proposed development merits it. Likewise, the Council is only one of a number of public, voluntary and statutory agencies working in the area and it is important that each of these organisations uses effective and transparent approaches to community involvement to aid decision making, especially when resources are so tight and not everybody's aspirations can be met.

How will the results of community involvement exercises be used?

The results of community involvement exercises will form part of the 'evidence base' presented to Councillors when they are asked to make decisions. The evidence base consists of a range of information that needs to be considered in making a decision. This may also include guidance and research.

It will be for the Councillors to judge the variety of comments made and to balance those comments with other relevant sources of information on the matter.

What status does the Statement have?

This Statement act as a guide and benchmark for all Council services to use when involving communities and in designing Community Involvement Plans (see page 4). As such, it represents a code of practice with key principles that need to be met when engaging with the public.

It will supersede the previously adopted Statement of Community Involvement and will become a statutory document of the Council's Local Development Framework.

It is intended to complement existing agreements, such as the West Sussex Compact¹ and the Town and Parish Council Charter² that the Council is already signed up to. The Council also recognises that in some areas of its work there are minimum legal standards for public consultation and these will be adhered to.

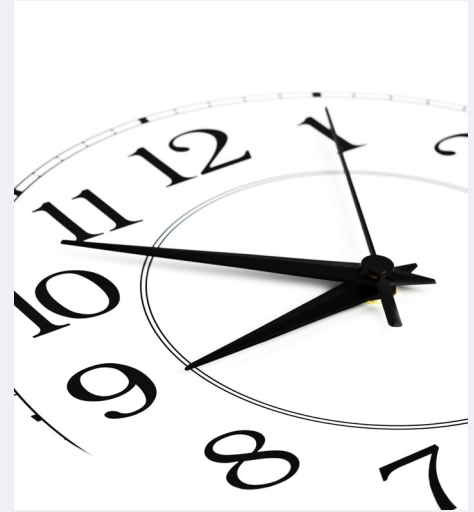
¹ www.midsussex.gov.uk/7547.htm

² www.midsussex.gov.uk/6510.htm

General Principles for Community Engagement

Principle 1: Be timely

The community should be involved as early as possible in the decision-making process when there is more potential to make a difference. Often, it is best to 'front load' consultation activity and use it to identify potential issues and options. However, consultation can be effectively used to confirm the level of support for particular courses of action too. Reasonable timescales should be given to the distribution of information and for responses to consultation. Potential participants should be given some notice of an impending community involvement exercise that could affect them, wherever possible.



Principle 2: Be inclusive

A key principle of community involvement is that it should be accessible to all those who wish to take part. This may well vary according to the nature of the matter being looked at. Reasonable effort must be made to ensure a representative cross-section of the community is involved including seldom heard groups and groups defined as having protected characteristics by Equalities Legislation. In designing each exercise, the Council will endeavour to understand and accommodate the different ways people want to get involved, where possible.

Principle 3: Be transparent

The quality of information provided to potential consultees must be clear, honest, accurate and unbiased. All written materials should use plain English and be jargon free. It is also important that the material makes it very clear what can be influenced and changed by the participant's suggestions and comments. Likewise, it needs to explain how and when decisions will be made, following the end of the consultation period.

Principle 4: Be respectful of each other's views

Community involvement exercises will usually uncover a range of views, some of which are in conflict or contradictory. The Council will listen to all the views it receives and seek to balance their relative merits, drawing on other information from the evidence base where that is available. Where the opinion being put forward is not clear it will seek to better understand what is being said. However, it is for all participants in the process to respect the views of other people and encourage a variety of contributions.

Principle 5: Be efficient

The Council will work with other organisations, where possible, to streamline consultation processes. Likewise, it will look to use existing networks to save time and resources, and to reduce duplication and 'consultation fatigue'. Town and Parish Councils can have a particularly important role in this. It is also important to ensure that community involvement exercises are proportionate to the scale and importance of the issue/matter under consideration (there is no 'off the shelf' way of conducting such exercises that can be applied to all matters). This will ensure that the Council's limited resources are spent as wisely as possible.

Principle 6: Be clear about results

It is essential that those who have contributed to a community involvement exercise are informed in a timely way about the results of the consultation and kept informed of further opportunities for being involved. This will often be in summary form, but it must be clear and objective in its presentation. Similarly, the Council will publicise the decision(s) it came to and, where this differs from the results of the consultation, it will explain why. In this way, it will demonstrate how the consultation exercise has affected the decision at hand.

What are Community Involvement Plans?

A Community Involvement Plan based on the template below should be completed for all significant consultation exercises³. It should be written in plain English, should reflect the principles outlined above, and be made publicly available in good time to view before the consultation exercise is due to commence, and for Council consultations, on the Council's website at www.midsussex.gov.uk/consultation.

Community Involvement Plan Template

Who is to be involved?

- List who will be asked for their views. This may be only those directly affected by a potential decision or it could be a wide consultation in which anybody can come forward⁴.
- Confirm how information will be treated confidentially, for instance where this raises issues with data protection or commercial confidentiality.
- Show how opportunities to work with other organisations and make involvement more comprehensive, or to share resources, have been decided.

Why people are being involved?

- Describe why people are being asked for their views.
- Indicate clearly what decision(s) is being made based on their involvement, including what can and cannot be changed. This may include, where relevant, a simple overview of the legal and/or policy framework or other constraints.
- Show how reasonable efforts are being made to ensure people are properly informed of the facts, background and purpose of the project before being asked for their view, including making available as much information as possible (including where it can be found) at an early stage.

When people will be involved?

- Indicate clearly the length of the consultation and how comments and views can be submitted (including any statutory requirements that need to be met).
- Consultation should be open for as long as possible, unless there are clear reasons not to or statutory guidelines state otherwise.

How people will be involved?

- Describe how information will be provided to people and how the consultation will maximise the number of people who can participate in it. For example, meeting venues should be as accessible as possible and be arranged for times that enable a cross-section of people to attend.
- Consider and highlight the availability of contact details for queries or supporting material such as summaries/ support material for consultation point staff.
- Set out what methods are to be employed to inform, consult and involve people (see table on page 5). This should pay particular attention to encouraging participation by so-called 'seldom heard' groups. Where necessary, an Equality Assessment will identify this in particular groups defined as having 'protected characteristics' by Equalities Legislation.
- Indicate how consultees should provide their comments.

What happens to the results?

- Explain how the results will be reported and when. For example, this will often be in a summary rather than a 'word for word' presentation of every submission.
- Describe how the results of the consultation will be fed back to those who took part and how they will be used to influence decisions. Where this differs from the results of the consultation, it should be explained why.

Who is running the exercise?

- State clearly who the consultee should contact if they wish to raise any queries about the exercise or if and how they can make a complaint about it.

What consultation methods will be used?

This table lists some of the activities and methods to consider when putting together a Community Involvement Plan. As previously stated, the methods used should be tailored to suit the scale and nature of impact of the decision to be made and the particular needs of people being consulted.

Informing people (letting people know about it)	Consulting people (asking for views and evidence)
Advertise locally	Key stakeholder discussions and forums
Create and update web pages	On-line consultation
Brief Town and Parish Councils and District Councillors	Documents/information sent directly to stakeholders
Place articles in local newspapers/magazines and District, Town and Parish Council publications	Structured feedback forms included with documents
Use notice boards in prominent places including those belonging to District, Town and Parish Councils and at public information points where possible.	Public meetings (for example planning area committees or Councillor surgeries)
Use posters, fliers and promotion	Public workshops
Deliver newsletters, leaflets, summary sheets	Questionnaire / surveys
Organise exhibition stands in relevant and/or prominent locations	Material made available in Council offices (District, Town and Parish Councils), libraries and on-line (lengthy documentation should be supplied with a summary).
Use email or text message notifications	
Provide briefings	Exhibitions
Involving people (discussions to develop ideas together)	
Workshops / forums/ focus groups / citizen panels to identify issues and shape options/ Councillors surgeries	
Meetings with community groups/ key stakeholders	
On-line discussion forums	



This table is not intended to be an exhaustive list of suitable methods. The approaches taken to public consultation are constantly changing and new methods will be used, when they are suitable.

3 Defined for planning as all Local Development Framework documents and for applicants submitting all 'major' applications

4 A list of those groups and organisations that the Council may consider involving is available at www.midsussex.gov.uk/sci.

Is this Statement making a difference?

The effectiveness of the Statement of Community Involvement will be monitored for each consultation exercise via a monitoring form (subject to the scale of the consultation exercise). This will be reported in the Consultation Report to ensure it remains appropriate and meets the needs of the community and the Council.

The Annual Monitoring Report (or equivalent document) will provide a summary evaluation of the effectiveness of the Council's consultation activity carried out over the year. This might include reporting on how successful consultations were and what respondents thought about their consultation experiences. It will use the key principles outlined in this guide as the basis for that review.

The Annual Monitoring Report may indicate that there is a need to review the Statement of Community Involvement. The Annual Monitoring Report will be available on the Council's web site at www.midsussex.gov.uk/amr.

What to do if you are unhappy with a community involvement exercise?

If you wish to raise issues, in the first instance you should directly contact the organisation that was involved in making the decision your question relates to. An example might be when an organisation does not properly inform you of the decision being made and what processes are being used to make the decision or when they do not adequately publicise results or feedback.

If you have a comment or concern with your experience of a Council led community involvement exercise, you should in the first instance, contact the officer detailed in the Community Involvement Plan available at www.midsussex.gov.uk/consultation. Alternatively you can contact the Customer Services and Communications Team by phone (01444) 477478 or by writing to Customer Services and Communications, Mid Sussex District Council, Oaklands Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH16 1SS.

Alternatively, you can use the Council's formal complaint procedure. The details of the procedure can be found on the Council's website at www.midsussex.gov.uk/complaints.

If your concern is about whether or not the Council has followed a statutory procedure, there may be a specific stage of the decision making process where these concerns can be made.

Glossary of terms

Annual Monitoring Report	Monitors the Local Development Framework. It is prepared by the Council and assesses the implementation of the Local Development Scheme and the effectiveness of policies.
Code of Practice	A set of written rules or principles which explain how people should aim to behave.
Community Group	A group of people with similar circumstances or shared interests.
Community Involvement	The process of engaging people in the local area.
Community Involvement Plan	Sets out how the process of engaging people will be managed and reported on.
Consultation	The act of asking for views and evidence and providing feedback on how the Council reached its decision.
Consultee	A person who is invited for advice on a matter.
Equalities Assessment	Assesses the effects that a review of policy, strategy, procedure or project could have on the community.
Evidence base	Information used to inform a decision. Can be guidance, research, facts, public comments and professional opinions.
Local Development Framework	Term used to describe the whole portfolio of planning policy documents (Local Development Documents) which set out the planning strategy and policies for an area.
Mid Sussex Partnership	Represents the residential, business, statutory and voluntary interests of an area and works to shape the area according to local concerns and needs
Parish and Town Charter	Sets out how Mid Sussex District Council and the Parish and Town Councils within the Mid Sussex district aim to work together across the two tiers.
Protected Characteristics	Defined by Equalities Legislation. There are nine 'protected characteristics' upon which discrimination is unlawful. These are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
Seldom-heard groups	Describe groups of people who are often not heard from when consultation is undertaken. Care must be taken to involve these groups.
Stakeholder	People with an interest in a subject or issue who are likely to be affected by any decision relating to it and/or have responsibilities relating to it.
Sustainable Community Strategy	Prepared by the Mid Sussex Partnership. Sets out goals and actions which the Partnership wishes to promote. Informs the Local Development Framework and acts as an umbrella for all other strategies devised for the area.
West Sussex Compact	Agreement between local government, local health services, other public bodies and the voluntary and community sector. It aims to improve relationships between these groups.