



**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

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Overarching Strategy on Understanding 'Harder to Reach' Groups and Breaking the Cycle of Deprivation

Overarching Principles: Achieving outcomes

The council is committed to fairness for all. This means making sure that all local people can access value for money services, which offer them the choices they need. Our strategic priorities are directly translated into outcomes for local people:

- Help the economy to grow with a real choice of opportunities and access to jobs, homes, leisure and services.
- Give us all the opportunity to enjoy effective teaching and learning.
- Safeguard our communities and maintain our rural character.
- Help our disadvantaged residents to live fulfilling and independent lives.
- Keep improving our services by listening to users' views.
- Make Oxfordshire a welcoming, safe and exceptional place to live, work, learn and visit.

Equality and social inclusion are a central part of the Cabinet portfolio for Change Management, linking directly to customer focus and the change agenda driving improvement in the whole organisation.

The 'cycle of deprivation'

This is a shorthand for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, crime, bad health and family breakdown. These problems are linked and mutually reinforcing. They can combine to create a complex vicious cycle¹.

People in many groups of society may be *at risk* of being excluded from services or choices in their life: young people, older people, disabled people, black and minority ethnic communities, asylum seekers, people whose first language is not English, people living in deprived urban areas, people living in isolated rural areas, and indeed anyone who is perceived to be out of step with their peers through their circumstances or even ambitions. It is important

¹ See 'Preventing Social Exclusion' report by SEU, March 2001, p. 10.

to note that falling into one of these groups does not make each individual deprived. Examples of the cycle of deprivation²:

- 60% of children in the lowest reading attainment group at age 10 had parents with low literacy scores.
- The annual cost of school exclusion is estimated at £406 million.
- We could save £300 million over three years if care leavers had the same rates of going into education, employment and training as their peers.
- The additional costs of being not in education, employment or training at age 16 – 18 have been estimated at around £8.1 billion in terms of public finance costs.
- Two out of five job-seekers say that transport is a key barrier to getting a job; six per cent of all 16-24 year-olds turn down training or further education opportunities because of problems with transport.
- 61% of children in workless couple households live in poverty (taken as below 60% of median income).
- Over a twelve-month period, nationally 1.4 million people miss, turn down or choose not to seek medical help because of transport problems.
- 63% of boys whose fathers go to prison are eventually convicted themselves.
- If one in ten young offenders received effective early intervention, it would save in excess of £100 million a year.
- People from some ethnic minority communities are more likely to live in unpopular and overcrowded housing.

The South East regional partners are actively involved in combating social exclusion, giving four reasons for concern³:

- Social exclusion is economically inefficient: an under-use of human resources.
- Socially excluded people are prevented from enjoying a fulfilling life, with consequent impact on health and realisation of potential.
- Social exclusion generates unnecessary costs in terms of welfare and health services and benefits.
- Social exclusion has social impacts (e.g. crime and drug use) which affect all society, and create a vicious circle.

The Region has set targets for the reduction of exclusion and deprivation. The Government Office for the South East (GOSE), and the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) have both committed themselves to policies which address social exclusion and engaging all sectors in making sure that

² National figures quoted from *Preventing Social Exclusion*, report by the Social Exclusion Unit, March 2001, p. 10., the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion web site and Cabinet Office *Families at Risk: Background on families with multiple disadvantages* (May 2007).

³ SEEDA Social Inclusion Strategy 2002, currently under review.

the widest community is considered. This is an important context for how Oxfordshire tackles the 'cycle of deprivation'.

Oxfordshire County Council has committed itself to combating social exclusion, in whatever form it takes. The council's Social Inclusion Strategy includes six key measures for achieving social inclusion, which reflect both the national issues, as well as specific local priorities:

- Improved educational achievement and opportunities for young people.
- Improved employment prospects.
- Improved health and social care.
- Reduced crime and fear of crime.
- Improved physical environment and housing.
- Improved transport links.

These priorities are refined in two ways: firstly, to meet the needs of particular populations e.g. the BME communities, and secondly, to meet the needs of particular localities, e.g. Blackbird Leys, Berinsfield and Grimsbury.

Identifying the 'harder to reach'

There are many reasons why people living in Oxfordshire may not have accessed services or contributed to shaping policies which affect service delivery. These people could be classed as 'harder to reach':

- Children and young people
- Drug users
- Gay men, lesbian women, transsexual and transgendered people
- Minority ethnic communities (particular sections of)
- Victims of domestic abuse
- Older people (especially older frail people, and isolated older people)
- Travellers
- Refugees and Asylum seekers
- People with learning difficulties
- Disabled people
- People with mental health problems
- Faith communities
- People who travel or commute into the area
- Small businesses
- Rural communities
- Homeless people

Some people may use our services, but have little input into how these services are shaped, and may not have been reached through the usual lines of consultation. They can be described as 'harder to hear':

- Some people, such as working single parents, have less spare time than others
- Some people do not understand written or spoken English
- Some people cannot hear or see

- Some people cannot get into many buildings
- Some groups feel culturally isolated from the 'mainstream' society
- Some groups feel alienated from, or even suspicious of, the organisation that is consulting them
- Some communities are geographically isolated
- Some people have no permanent address
- Some people are living with a long-term illness
- Some people are out at work all day
- Some people are not interested in being consulted by public bodies
- Some people, e.g. children and young people are often not considered appropriate consultees and often also do not consider themselves as likely to be taken seriously

These groups or individuals are by no means uniform, and by no means all people could be considered 'vulnerable' by being categorised in one of these groups *per se*. It is very likely that many will be 'harder to reach' for some services but not for others. For example, young mothers may be in regular contact with health services, but may be a 'harder to reach' group for local transport planners. This means that within our organisation, services reach out to a very diverse population. We now need to make sure that these approaches are joined-up, and that effort it made to identify and listen to those groups who are not among the 'easy to reach' to whom we already respond.

Evidence: a listening organisation

A wide range of information is already used to identify who uses our services, who doesn't, and to probe why not. Services and directorates collect their own user information and performance indicators. These are analysed in an increasingly sophisticated way, for example, by age, gender and ethnicity, to look for trends amongst the population of interest, and to compare with local demographic data drawn together in our *Oxfordshire in Detail* report and by the Oxfordshire Data Observatory. Such analysis allows a service to see where 'gaps' exist. For example, if few older men are using day care services, but the local population contains a number of older men, this group could be identified as 'harder to reach', and the reasons investigated. This monitoring information contributes to our understanding of the nature, extent, locality and patterns of participation or exclusion across Oxfordshire.

Consultation and community engagement methods ensure that the needs and requirements of 'harder to reach' groups are identified. This is done at both a service and corporate level, with a strategic over-view to ensure a coherent approach, so that we can learn as much as possible about local needs. Our consultative mechanisms include a residents' satisfaction survey, regular use of a Citizen's Panel of local people, and consultation with children and young people as part of the ongoing Children and Young People's Plan activity. A thorough review of corporate consultation is being used to strengthen our understanding of local people's needs, across the council.

The development of a culture of customer service throughout the organisation is a critical component of the future of the services offered to communities.

Improvements in the 'Customer First' team include consolidating all activities that involve consultation with internal and external customers into the 'Ask Oxfordshire' team.

Policy: Bridging the Gap

The council has a number of statutory schemes which provide the core to a consistent corporate approach to harder to reach groups. These are the Comprehensive Equality Policy, Social Inclusion Strategy, Race Equality Scheme, Disability Equality Scheme and Gender Equality Scheme. Each of these supports the framework whereby equality of opportunity and access to services is promoted. Together they provide a robust and consistent mechanism for ensuring that 'harder to reach' groups are considered in consultation, policy planning and service delivery.

Services are also engaged in thinking about their provision and 'harder to reach groups' through the process of Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs), which the council established in advance of statutory requirements. These have direct outcomes for service planning, including hard targets for improvement. The EQIA process provides a mechanism for influencing policy, reflecting learning, and culture change. Each Directorate also has an Equality Steering Group. As well as raising directorate specific issues these groups help to disseminate corporate objectives, and to ensure an implementation culture at service level.

The drive to achieve Charter Mark for the whole council means that standards, performance, consultation and accessibility are being joined up corporately, to ensure that customers and potential customers are being reached with appropriate services. The revised Charter Mark standard gives more emphasis to issues of access and consultation, and focuses even more strongly on customers, including the 'harder to reach'. Evidence of our customer needs informs both our policy making and improving our performance.

The council has a Social Inclusion Reference Group which is made up of local voluntary and community organisations, together with County Councillors and officers from all Directorates. The Reference Group has a remit to advise the council on community engagement activities and consultation with people often regarded as 'hard to reach'.

Stakeholders and partners are engaged through various partnership structures. As many of the local voluntary and community organisations are well placed to speak for 'harder to hear' groups, they are a vital component in our mechanism for listening and responding. The Local Area Agreement and Oxfordshire Partnership are both directly related to the drive to improve access to services for those who are most vulnerable, and improve performance within the county as a whole.

The Corporate Change programme has several key elements which directly relate to how the organisation needs to behave in order to meet the needs of 'harder to reach' groups:

- Change Aim 1: Efficiency and Economy. This includes action points to work with partners to improve services and reduce costs.
- Change Aim 4: Customer Focus. This includes the Charter Mark programme and using the results of consultation to help set priorities and improve customers' experience of the council.
- Change Aim 5: One Team. This includes aiming to be an organisation that is responsive to local needs. Using plain English is a straightforward way to stop excluding people.

Outcomes: Operationalising policy into action

Prioritising

With our key partners the County Council is responding to significant issues of deprivation and exclusion. This means that the County Council, PCT and others on the Children and Young People's Board will share a focus on the following:

- Improved school attainment, including the performance of BME and vulnerable groups.
- Guaranteed standards for a good start in life, to include a core set of services for all families, to include health and social services.
- Diverting young people from antisocial behaviour, focusing on the worst affected areas.
- Improving access to services and real choice for people from BME and traveller communities.
- Improving value for money through better use of targeted joint resources in our most deprived communities.
- Reducing the rate of teenage pregnancy, especially where the rate is currently highest.

Implementation

Implementing activity around these priorities will be incorporated into joined-up commissioning work aimed at improving key outcomes. In addition we have many examples of excellent practice within the services. Each equality scheme sets out the actions which services will undertake to ensure not just statutory compliance but also to achieve real outcomes for our customers. The scheme actions points are regularly monitored and reported on. The Social Inclusion Action Plan provides a framework for implementation of real change, and the EQIA action plans give detailed guidance for teams across the council.

Leadership and Commitment

Senior level support is seen as vital to good practice and success in including harder to reach groups. The Council has a Cabinet portfolio holder with responsibility for equality and social inclusion, giving solid support to the profile of these issues. The Cabinet member chairs the Social Inclusion

Reference Group and liases directly with representatives of the local voluntary and community sector groups with particular relevance to social inclusion. The council recognises that engaging with 'harder to reach' groups takes substantial commitment and time.

Partnership

The council works to influence the activity and contribution of partner organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors by ensuring that equality issues and considerations are fully taken into account when developing major strategies such as the Sustainable Communities Strategy. This is a long-term process with commitment to build capacity and increase the profile of equalities issues. Effective partnership working in turn enhances the choice and control of people over their own lives.

Making a difference

The council needs to keep exploring how the process of engagement leads to positive outcomes for local people, and how 'harder to reach' groups are actively benefited by our corporate policies. EQIAs, consultation, and the equality schemes all contribute to this overarching approach. They are each a tool to be used by the services to show the difference that they are making. Each process provides evidence of positive outcomes, areas for improvement and prioritisation. In addition to providing evidence for our corporate Charter Mark, this monitoring allows for policy to be well informed and well targeted, ensuring that we keep our council's commitments to low taxes, real choice and value for money.

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