

You Said; We Did

So, what's come out of our Town and Parish Liaison Events?

Background

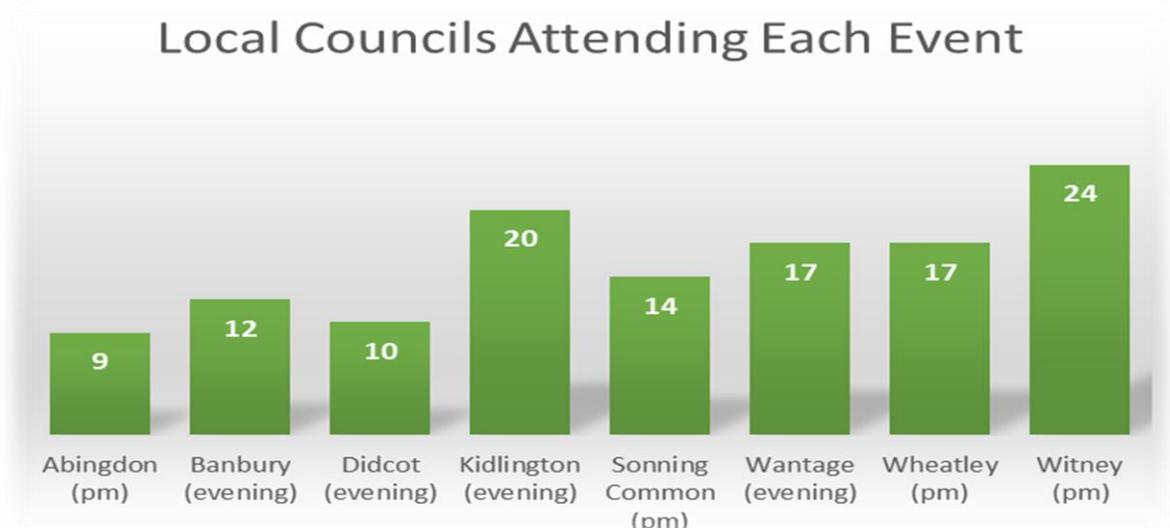
In September 2018, Oxfordshire County Council began a short series of events around the county, inviting all local councils and parish meetings to meet senior officers from some of its services.

In a residents' survey in autumn 2018, we'd been told that "the county council seems remote" so we decided to take some of our senior officers, our Leader and our Cabinet Member for Communities out to meet local councils face to face.

The Events



This represents almost 40% of the 317 local councils (including Meetings) in Oxfordshire. Some events were held in the afternoon and some in the evening; attendance levels varied but were not linked to the time of day of the events.



County council services that took part in the events included Infrastructure Operations, Highways, Community Emergency Planning, Supported Transport, Strategic Commissioning and Fire & Rescue. Others sent factsheets and leaflets for attendees to pick up, such as the Digital Infrastructure Broadband team.

At some events, parishes mentioned services they would have liked to have had the opportunity to talk with which weren't represented. These included Education and Adult Social Care. Co-producing the agendas with parishes in advance would mitigate against this in future, and most parishes when asked were eager to do this.

What happened at the events?



Each event began with a welcome from the Leader of the Council, followed by a short presentation from our Strategic Director for Communities. This set out the current overarching situation the county council is operating in, and the big themes it is grappling with. The room then broke into group discussions, with senior officers rotating around the tables at set intervals, to ensure everyone had a chance to speak to them all, with sufficient time for a good quality conversation. Feedback on this style was very positive, with parishes valuing the chance to discuss specifics in depth.

Officers and councillors heard about local issues that communities felt hampered by, or were struggling to find a solution to. Sometimes this was about OCC services or communication that didn't seem to work for them.

We seized the opportunity to spread the word about services we provide for communities, and to get instant feedback to help us make them more effective. We talked about our Thriving Communities vision, and how local councils are integral to it, with many local councils taking away a copy of our Corporate Plan with them.

We've had some encouraging outcomes already from the sessions, and our intention is that our approach to working with local councils will evolve, as we continue efforts to effectively meet with them and hear their voices.

What issues and themes came up?

Highways and infrastructure

There were some specific, local problems that communities were concerned about:

"We've had a pothole on our main street marked round with red paint for immediate action for ages. But nothing's been done."

Mollington Parish Council

"Our Highways team and the Inspector checked the defect the day after this was brought up at the event. The category 1 defect had been actioned, but the red marks hadn't been blacked out. However, the ground around it had settled, so a repair has been planned in to provide a more durable solution."

"Can you tell us about the type of repair you'll be doing on our railway bridge, and what road closures are going to be needed so we can tell people what to expect?"

Chinnor Parish Council

"It will be like for like and only take one day of road closure. When we know the date, our engineer will be in touch to tell you. If you have any questions or any information about local events or issues that might be relevant, do liaise directly with our engineer."

We're also following up with some local councils who were keen to register someone from their communities as 'SuperUsers' of Fix My Street. This scheme is being piloted, as a streamlined way for communities to report defects directly with our contractors themselves, rather than coming through the county council first.

At our Wantage event, we heard from communities right across the area with concerns about growth, traffic safety and sustainability along the A420. Our Infrastructure team have noted this and will be picking it up in future:

"Within the next 6 months we'll be talking to individual parishes about the A420 in their local patch, as part of our work on the Local Transport Plan 5 update."



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We're also supporting a parish council in the south of the county with some Highways knowledge and guidance, in its project to spend CIL funding on improvements to its village centre.

Communications

There were quite a few instances where local councils were frustrated in helping their communities by not knowing who to approach at the county council:

"We don't know who our Highways Officer is; it's hard to find the right person to talk to and get a response."

We know that for local councils, communication with our specialist services can sometimes be tricky; this forms part of our forthcoming work on transformation of the entire county council, and how we support local councils with issues 'pre-front door' (i.e. in the community before it escalates to needing our services).

"We're hearing this from across the county, so we'll be writing to all local councils and parish meetings, letting them know who their key officers are: this will include the Highway Inspector, PRow officer, Tree Officer etc. The Highways Officers' objectives will be to contact all of their respective parishes to have that engagement with them and to find out what their local issues are."

Signposting and support

We've had the chance at the events to tell local councils about some of our services and what we can support them with.

Our [Emergency Planning team](#), part of Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service, has used the events to give out goody bags with information on things like the [Message In A Bottle](#) scheme and the [Are You Ready?](#) booklet, and to point local councils in the direction of thousands of pounds of [available funding from utility companies](#) for projects in their communities. In this way they've contacted 123 places through attending just 8 events.

"We're leaving with more than we came with; I had no idea all this was available for free and that you could help us work through it."

Local councillor at our Witney event

Our [Live Well Oxfordshire](#) website for adults was demonstrated at some of our events, and was well received by local councils. The website helps local people to find support groups, activities and clubs or services like adult social care providers in their area, and communities can also suggest a service to be added to it. It's part of working towards our priority to enable people to be safe, well and active in their communities, and to combat loneliness and isolation, which in turn impacts health.

“Lots of local councils at the events wanted to link to Live Well Oxfordshire from their own websites, now that they’ve seen it. Our first parish to do so was Steeple Aston: <https://www.steepleaston.org.uk/home/noticeboard/#link5>”

Our Cabinet Member for Communities was also keen to emphasise to local councils at events that their local county councillor can act as their link into our services, and help them reach the right people. This communication route is really important, and helps us to keep in touch with local needs all over the county.

Public transport

Rural bus routes and community transport was another issue for discussion across many events. Our Supported Transport service heard that some communities lacked resources and capacity to set up their own transport, following reductions in bus services locally.

“We need advice and support on steps and options for setting up a Community Transport operation.”

Filkins & Broughton Pogges Parish Council

“We’ll come to your parish meeting to talk to you about this, and while we don’t have extra financial resources, we can certainly support you through the process.”

As part of our support, we committed to helping some smaller, rural local councils to access the Parish Transport Representative meetings, so their voices and issues are amplified.

So what next?

At the end of each event, we asked local councils for feedback, and how they wanted to meet us in future. Overwhelmingly, the response was that an annual event for any given geographical area would be appreciated.

Local councils were keen to coproduce the agendas, to enable us to have the right officers attending to talk about the issues that are important locally.

We also heard that local councils want us to join with the Districts, to link everything up.

"Please pass on our thanks for running the event. We found it really useful."
Chalgrove Parish Council

"It was very useful and informative to attend this."
Watlington Parish Council

"The fact that you have followed up certainly indicates that the message put across was to build bridges, so a promising start. I found the event well worth having attended, and with some useful information to take away and consider for further action at local level."

Baulking Parish Meeting

"Thanks to you for the efficient way the meeting was organised, right down to table layout, reference materials and refreshments."

Sonning Common Parish Council

"We'll continue meeting you and give some thought to how our events can be most effective. It's great that local councils find meeting up with us useful, and we want you to help us set the agendas in future".

*Diane Cameron – Policy Officer
February 2019*



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