



Community Engagement Policy

1. Introduction

1.1 This document forms the Town Council's second Community Engagement Policy.

It sets out:

- The Role of community engagement and its importance;
- How Biggleswade Town Council engages the wider community and identifies the needs aspirations of the community.
- How the Town Council can improve community engagement.

1.2 The objectives of the policy are to;

- Encourage effective local community engagement;
- Ensure that embedded throughout the council there is clear understanding of the need to engage with communities about decisions that affect them;
- Enable aspirations/ comments/suggestions obtained from community engagement to have an impact on decision making and the way services are being delivered;
- Identify how the council can enhance its profile by improving engagement with the wider community (with specific reference to hard to reach groups).

2. Community Engagement – an Overview

2.1 Community engagement is concerned with giving local people a voice and involving them in decisions which affect them and their community. This may include individuals, voluntary and community organisations as well as other public sector bodies.

It provides opportunity for local people to talk to the council about their aspirations and or needs in their community and neighbourhood. It allows the council to consult with and inform people about what services it provides, how it prioritises, how policies are determined and how well its performing.

2.2 The term stakeholder makes reference to a wide range of people and groups (these might include, residents, visitors, businesses, government, voluntary organisations and public service organisations), all of which have an interest in the council's services and projects.

Hard to Reach groups refers to those who experience social exclusion and are sometimes perceived as being disempowered. Some examples include young people, elderly people, physical disability, language barriers, financial constraints, cultural differences or social expectations. The Town Council will put effort into seeking their views, but it also recognises that sometimes they have excluded themselves through personal choice.

2.3 The key aspects of community engagement include:

- Development of a network of relationships between council, individuals, voluntary and community groups.
- Clear and open communication to ensure that information is made accessible to all groups.
- Listening and understanding from a range of people to identify aspirations, needs and problems of local people and groups.

2.4 Effective and meaningful community engagement can provide a number of benefits:

- The problems and needs of local people are clearly identified in order that appropriate new or improved facilities / services can be provided.
- Those participating feel empowered by being involved in decision making in their local community.
- This may result in enhanced leadership and greater interest in elections and standing for council.

3. Biggleswade Town Council and Community Engagement

3.1 The Town Council will facilitate community engagement in the following ways:

- Making information on what decisions are being considered and how residents can influence or contribute to the discussions in good time.

Methods used to ensure engagement will be - through the Town Council website, notice boards, the Town Council's Newsletter within Biggleswade bulletin, Face book, Twitter, posters, consultations, reports and word of mouth.

- All meetings of the Town Council and its committees are open to the public and press and there are two periods set aside for residents to speak.

Residents can access agendas for meetings via the Town Council web site, share point, notice boards and can be collected from the town hall, public agendas are also made available at the meetings of the council and its committees.

The Town Council website, notice boards, agendas and the town hall explain the procedure for residents wishing to speak at meetings. Facilities also exist where residents can, where appropriate or necessary, make written reports present petitions or have a case presented on their behalf to councillors,

- Planning applications are considered at Council meetings held twice monthly. The opportunities for people to speak applies equally to these agenda items. Equal opportunity is given to applicants/supporters, objectors and local community groups.
- The Town Clerk's office is required to play a neutral role so that residents can be fully involved and be confident that they are receiving unbiased information and support.

This neutral involvement will allow more flexibility in the service and the personal element of the contact, will hopefully encourage more involvement from the hard to reach members of the community.

- Details of how to contact the Town Clerk's office will be displayed on notice boards, Biggleswade bulletin, council website, Facebook and Twitter. Details of how to contact Councillors will be displayed on notice boards and the Town Council web site.

- The Town Council will produce a list of annual council and committee dates to include the start times of the meetings and agenda distribution dates.
- The Town Council will be open and accountable in its dealing with residents and the community. It will make information on its policies and procedures freely available.
- The Town Council will be receptive to requests from residents or communities and will attempt to be flexible in order to ensure their opinions are known not only to the Town Council but also to other organisations.

This may be by including an item for discussion on an agenda or allowing a local group to put their opinions into an official report undertaken by the Town Council.

- The Town Council will, operate a “gateway” service from both its offices and community centre to ensure local people and communities are referred to the correct organisation, officer, unitary or Town Councillor where the Town Council cannot resolve their issue directly and that they are aware of the ways that they can use the relevant systems to make their views known.
- Town councillors will continue to represent the Council on various outside bodies, to ensure that they are kept informed of the communities’ needs.

4. Communication

4.1 Biggleswade Town Council is committed to improving community engagement by:

- Continuing all the above activities and services into the future and improving relationships with community groups, including developing measures to harness the views and opinions of people and groups who are often missed out of community engagement activities.
- Biggleswade Town Council will be proactive and will be willing to consider any reasonable opportunities that support its purpose of getting information available and increasing contributions from the community, especially those difficult to reach.
- When dealing with controversial issues that affect a particular community then consideration will be given to holding a public meeting.
- Consultations and surveys are to be considered when necessary and appropriate and results will be made available.
- Continuing to work in partnership to produce and review community led policies such as Biggleswade Town Centre Masterplan and Biggleswade Green Infrastructure Plan. It will also ensure that priorities from such policies are built into its own Business Plan.
- Identifying and embracing opportunities to work with other local community groups when the need arises.
- Publicising the positive results that have been achieved from working relationships between council and other community groups; in order to encourage new relationships/ partnerships to be formed and to raise community spirit.
- Promoting elections and the importance of the democratic process and the value of being a councillor.
- Promoting the value to the town of volunteering.

- The Town Council will review its community Engagement Strategy on an annual basis to ensure that it remains relevant.

5. Freedom of Information

- 5.1 In accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000, this document will be posted on the Council website and copies will be available from the Town Council office.

6. Outcomes

The outcomes which we are striving for and against which the success of this policy will be measured are:

- Improved communication through the establishment of new channels of engagement.
- More residents understanding the role of Councillors and getting the best effect.
- Improved engagement with local communities, with more people feeling that they are involved in decision-making and a higher percentage of people involved in volunteering.
- Improved satisfaction with services provided by the Council.