

Community Engagement Strategy

Policy Document BTC/020/COMMS

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BEWDLEY
Town Council

The Guildhall, Load Street
Bewdley DY12 2AH
01299 400157
www.bewdleytowncouncil.org

Community Engagement Strategy

Date Adopted: _____

Review Date: _____

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

1. Objectives

The objectives of this strategy are to:

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

2. The Council's Commitment to Community Engagement

Bewdley Town Council recognises the need to consider the impact of its actions on others and the surrounding environment and is committed to its vision, aspirations and objectives to provide a democratic representational voice for the people of Bewdley. Central to this is effective engagement with the local community in a proactive and meaningful way.

3. Corporate Aims

Community engagement is a key theme in the delivery of the Council's 3 Areas of Focus in its Corporate Plan:

1. The Economy
2. The Environment
3. The Community

4. The Community

4.1 To achieve a vibrant and participatory community, the Council needs greater involvement with people from all sectors of the community. As decision makers, the Council needs to be able to tap in and respond to the feelings, thoughts, knowledge, interest and expertise in the town. It is clear that involvement doesn't mean simply asking the town's people what they want and acting on the majority decision. Our understanding of involvement is that it is a two-way communication process allowing the best (and not always the most popular) decisions to be made and the reasons behind those decisions to be understood.

4.2 The Council sees participation as the direct involvement of individuals or groups through a planned method or technique to inform the decision making process. Participation may be open or it may not depending on what is required. Participation events may directly inform decision making or the outcome may be to understand and/or inform the views held in the wider community.

4.3 The Council sees consultation as the seeking of views on a specific subject. Our understanding of consultation is that it should be used sparingly, it is focussed, asks specific questions and the limitations of its impact clearly understood. Crucially, asking the right questions in the right manner will be more important than receiving the “right” answers. Consultation, like participation, may be open or limited to relevant groups.

5. Principles

5.1 The Localism Act 2011 places considerable onus on increased involvement and therefore initial guiding principles are required, as noted below:

5.2 Involvement Principles

- The Town Council cannot force any individual or group to become involved but it can, and will, make it easier and more attractive to do so.
- It will always be clear, before the start of any participation or consultation event, to what extent the result will inform a decision.
- If the outcome of a participation or consultation event is intended to inform a decision and a different decision is taken, the reasoning behind that decision will be clear and published.
- All involvement will be time-bound and the aggregated results will be published openly.
- Not every decision requires community involvement.

5.3 Engagement Principles

- The Council will be clear at the start of the event what output is expected e.g. a recommendation, strategy suggestion etc.
- Consultation events are not intended as an opportunity for individuals with a particular interest to lobby decision makers. While individuals may well have links with groups that have a vested interest, they should not represent those groups in informing the process. The process should encourage people to take the wider view, and to ensure that those not able to be at an event have their views expressed by others.

5.4 Consultation Principles

- Consultations will be targeted at the relevant group or groups.
- Events will be time-bound.
- If an event calls for wider public involvement the event will be advertised locally allowing people time to organise their engagement with the event.
- Specific, non-leading questions will be asked. Questions can be open (e.g. where do you think new houses should be sited?) but not open-ended (e.g. what do you think should be done?).
- Care will be taken to ensure that no one voice is given greater weight than any other.

6. Bewdley Town Council and Community Engagement

6.1 The Council currently facilitates community engagement in the following ways:

- ✓ Allocation of public participation at the beginning of each Council and Committee meeting. This provides an opportunity for local residents to make representations to the Council or ask questions relating to items on the agenda.
- ✓ The publishing of agendas, minutes and supporting documents for all Council meetings on the website, and on various notice boards around the town.
- ✓ Active involvement in the Annual Town Meeting with its public question time.
- ✓ The annual External Audit provides the opportunity for questions to be asked about the latest Statement of Accounts and Balance Sheet. All financial information including monthly payments lists are published online.
- ✓ Making available Councillor contact details on the website and on various notice boards around the town.
- ✓ Production of regular Town Council newsletters highlighting local events and latest developments. News and events are also publicised through the website, the Council's Facebook page and via the production of the "Town Council News" article in each edition of The Bridge Magazine, delivered to 4000 homes.
- ✓ The Annual Report and Statement of Accounts made available as printed copies and on the website.
- ✓ Consultation exercises, surveys and questionnaires are undertaken with residents, young people and local user groups and organisations for specific projects and tasks. These may be in paper and/or online formats.
- ✓ Regular press releases featured in local media keep the general public informed of community events, projects and other Town Council items of interest.
- ✓ Some Members and officers act as representatives for outside bodies comprising community groups, local organisations, and other government agencies, and regularly attend their meetings.
- ✓ The Council offices in the town centre are open from 10am to 4pm, Monday to Friday.
- ✓ Where and when appropriate, external resource may be utilised for a large and time consuming consultation exercise.
- ✓ The Council employs an officer whose job description includes a specific remit to enhance community engagement.
- ✓ The Council hosts a "Young Mayor" who has direct access to the Council, its officers and Town Councillors and acts as a liaison between the Council and the town's schools and wider community of young people.

6.2 Unlike other tiers of local government, Town Councillors always live within 3 miles of the town they serve and therefore have close ties to their constituents and local voluntary and community organisations on a day-to-day basis, making them uniquely placed in terms of informed representation.

7. Future Improvements

7.1 Bewdley Town Council is committed to improving community engagement by enforcing the principles set out above and:

- Continuing all the above activities and services into the future; improving relationships with community groups; developing measures to harness the views and opinions of people and groups who are often missed out of community engagement activities.
- Identifying and embracing opportunities to work with other local community groups, as and when the need arises.
- Extending and developing the range of electronic communication including an enhanced presence on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn etc.
- Participating in local and national networks to share knowledge and experience of community engagement activities in other areas.
- Publicising the positive results that have been achieved from working relationships between the Council and other community groups; in order to encourage new relationships to be formed and raise community spirit.
- Ensuring that appropriate evaluation is carried out following consultation exercises to ensure that lessons learned are carried forward and an assessment of how effective and useful the consultation was.
- Increase the amount of publicity surrounding the achievements of the Town Council and the services it provides/facilitates.