

Sleaford Town Council

CONSTITUTION

Chapter 17

Community Engagement Strategy



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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of community engagement is to effectively involve people in the decision-making processes and work of the Town Council. It will give a voice to local people as individuals, as well as community groups, public bodies, businesses, and anyone with an interest in the Council's services and projects. Engagement is a two-way process, which allows the public to talk to the Council about their views and needs and in return enables the Council to tell the community about its work, its priorities and how well it is performing.

The aim of the strategy is to provide opportunities for people to participate at whatever level they wish in order to influence the Council's service delivery, priorities and policies.

Effective community engagement will help to clearly identify the needs of local people, empower the community in local decision-making, and create a greater level of interest in, and understanding of, local government.

2. 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].

3. THE COUNCIL'S COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Sleaford Town Council recognises the need to consider the impact of its actions on others and the surrounding environment. As a result, the Council's plans will be founded in the belief that the actions will help to protect and wherever possible enhance environmental quality and of equal importance, the decisions will be made ethically with regards to social and economic impact, which together the Council believes will help to make Sleaford a better place.

Sleaford Town Council is committed in its vision, aspirations and objectives to provide a democratic representational voice for the people of Sleaford, central to this ethos is engagement with the local community in a proactive and meaningful way, as embodied in the Council's Strategy document.

'Sleaford Town Council will work for and with local people to make Sleaford a better place'

4. CORPORATE AIMS

Community engagement is embodied in the delivery of the vision that the Council embraces for the town:

- Building a Sustainable Economy
- A Vibrant Participatory Community
- A Thriving Town Centre
- Efficient and Effective delivery of its Services
- An Innovative and Supportive Town Council

5. A VIBRANT PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY

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 allowing the best [and not always the most popular] decisions to be made and the reasons behind those decisions to be understood.

The Council sees participation as the direct involvement of individuals or groups through a planned method or technique in informing the decision making process. Participation may be open or it may not be 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.

The Council sees consultation as the seeking of views on a specific subject. Our understanding of consultation is that it should be used sparingly, focussed; asking 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.

6. PRINCIPLES

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

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.

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.

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 swings 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.

7. SLEAFORD TOWN COUNCIL AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Council currently facilitates community engagement in the following ways:

- Allocation of Public Participation at the beginning of each Full Council 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, in the office window 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. A synopsis of the financial accounts is published within the Annual Report.
- Making available the Councillor's contact details on the website and on various notice boards around town.
- Production of regular Town Council newsletters highlighting local events and latest developments. News and events are also publicised through the website.
- The Annual Report and Statement of Accounts made available 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.
- Inviting members of the public to Councillor Surgeries held on the first Saturday of each month, Open Forums, Working Groups and the Full Council Question Time period.
- 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's Town Hall Offices near the town centre are also open from Monday to Friday.
- Where and when appropriate, external resource may be utilised for a large and time consuming consultation exercise.

Unlike other tiers of local government, Town Councillors always live within a few 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.

8. THE DELIVERY OF SUCCESS

The success of this strategy lies with all Councillors, who actively work to enhance community engagement in Town Council decision making) and the Acting Town Clerk who is responsible for overseeing its implementation.

This policy will be reviewed on a four-year cycle. However, the policy may be developed and enhanced more frequently in light of on-going experiences in engaging with the community.

9. Future Improvements

Sleaford Town Council is committed to improving community engagement by enforcing the aforementioned principles 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.
- Participating in local 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.

10. Linking with other Council Policies

This strategy is cross-cutting affecting many, if not all, of the Council's policies and strategies. Including:

- Equality and diversity is integral to good governance, leadership and appreciation of the diversity in our community.
- A Community Engagement Strategy is a requirement for the accreditation of Quality Council Status which Sleaford Town Council is aiming to achieve.