

Community Engagement Strategy

Introduction

Councils are at the heart of local democracy and it is essential that all sections of our local community have the opportunity to engage with us. We believe that everyone should be able to play a role in the things that matter to them most.

Community engagement is the process by which Tendring District Council aims to build strong, connected, involved and empowered communities with voices that will be heard and responded to as part of local decision-making.

This document sets out our aims in relation to community engagement and outlines how we will engage with our communities. It builds on the good practices that already exist within the Council and sets out a way forward for engaging with local people in the future.

Our Aim

We aim to support strong, active and inclusive communities who:

- are informed and involved in decision making;
- can influence and shape the area in which they live and work; and
- have the capacity to develop and deliver their own projects.

What is Community Engagement?

The term 'community engagement' can cover a range of different activities and approaches. It is best seen as a planned process, which has the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by place, interest, affiliation or identity, to encourage them to actively take part in making decisions about their community.

This can range from encouraging communities to share their views on how their needs are best met and influence how services should be delivered, to giving communities the power to make and share decisions and deliver their own projects.

Effective community engagement involves an ongoing dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders within our communities and is something that happens every day, in every interaction, at every level, as we carry out our day to day business. The process of engagement aims to create better relationships and greater trust as well as an equal exchange of viewpoints between the Council and other participants.

Similarly, participation involves the activities, at various levels, by which individuals and communities share in the responsibility for shaping decisions and improving services.

Definition of community

Communities can be defined in a number of ways but are usually defined as groups of people who have common characteristics. These can be broadly categorised as:

Communities of place where the community is defined by a location with physical boundaries, such as a street, ward, district or region.

Communities of interest where the community is defined by a shared interest, affinity or other common bond, such as religion, profession, student or business community.

Communities of identity where the community includes people who often identify themselves or are identified by society, by demographic characteristics, for example, children and young people, older people, black and minority ethnic people, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people or people with a shared social background.

People will often be members of several different 'communities' and members of defined communities may not necessarily regard themselves as such and this needs to be taken into account.

Why is community engagement important?

Engaging with people is at the heart of council business and we believe that people who live and work in the Tendring district have the right to influence and have a stake in the future of the district.

There are benefits to both communities and the Council when engagement is undertaken and these include:

- Strengthening the democratic legitimacy of government and the civic life of the community;
- More efficient and effective services that better reflect the needs of service users and have higher levels of customer satisfaction;
- A reduction in community inequalities;
- Building strong, involved and empowered communities that are more resilient and self-sufficient;
- Improved relationships within communities through open conversation and honest feedback;
- Creating a sense of place where people feel that they belong to a community;
- Greater local ownership of Council and other services;
- A better understanding of how and why local services need to change and develop; and
- Development of new skills and confidence for individuals and communities.

It is important that community engagement should occur in a way that is planned and integral to everyday working practices and should not be seen as a one off or ad hoc activity. Engagement activities which are done badly can lead to misleading results that undermine the process and reduce the prospect that people will engage again.

However, there are times when community engagement is not appropriate, for example, if the decision is under direction from Government and cannot be changed or altered or views have already recently been obtained on a similar topic.

Working in partnership

The Council recognises the benefits of partnership working and, whenever possible and practical, will work in partnership to effectively engage and involve local people. By working

together, agencies can gain a much clearer picture of local issues and the specific needs of the community.

On a practical level, economies of scale can also be achieved where engagement activities can be joined up and undertaken simultaneously and this also prevents engagement fatigue for members of the community.

We will seek to actively engage relevant people and partners on an ongoing basis and this will include the following.

- Tending residents and others defined as local people (for example those working or studying in the district);
- Ward, Town and Parish councillors;
- Council employees;
- Voluntary and community groups - both individually and through any local infrastructure organisations;
- Smaller community groups such as residents associations and local support groups;
- Private sector organisations, local businesses and social enterprises; and
- Public service providers such as the County Council, the police, education, health and housing providers.

We know that we need to work closely with communities to encourage effective community engagement and ensure that processes are flexible and can be tailored to diverse groups and individuals in different areas of the district.

We understand that sometimes people are reluctant to get involved and we will work with other partners to ensure that community engagement is as inclusive as possible.

National context

The Council is required to undertake consultation when there is a statutory duty to do so through individual legislative frameworks, such as planning, licensing and housing.

The importance of effective community engagement is recognised nationally and over the last two decades there have been many drives to encourage greater community involvement backed by the view it supports better decision making and builds trust.

In addition, under the general duty set out in Section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999, which requires an authority *“to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”*, the authority is under an obligation to consult certain groups of persons for the purpose of deciding how to fulfil the duty.

The Public Sector Equality Duty, created by the Equality Act 2010, also required councils to recognise the need to encourage people to take part in public life and other activities.

The Localism Act (2011) introduced new rights and powers for communities, giving them the freedom to be better involved in the way local decisions are made and more influence over the future of where they live.

Local context

The Council adopted a new Corporate Plan in January 2020 and the Plan's vision is *'to put community leadership at the heart of everything we do through the delivery of high quality, affordable services and working positively with others'*.

The Corporate Plan sets out ambitions in five key areas:

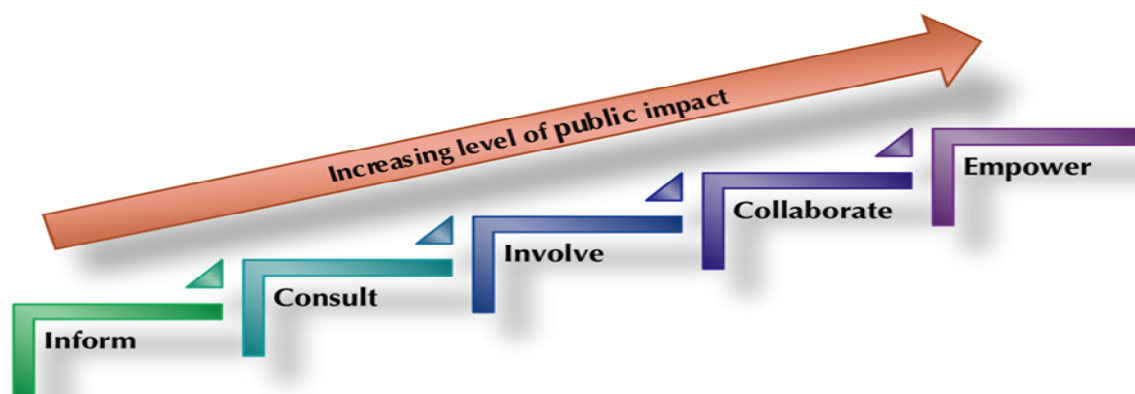
- Delivering high quality services;
- Community leadership through partnerships;
- Building sustainable communities for the future;
- Strong finance and governance and;
- A growing and inclusive economy.

This strategy is also closely linked to the Council's Communications Strategy as good communication establishes trust and a stronger relationship between ourselves and the public, allowing more effective service delivery and a better reputation, which in turns allows us to lever better outcomes for our community.

The Council's Communications Strategy sets out how we will manage our communications activity, helping to ensure communication between the council and the people and organisations we come into contact with is always appropriate. It also acknowledges that communication is a two way process and we want people to share ideas and opinions with us. Whilst two-way communication should not replace dedicated engagement, it is a vital pillar to ensure that this engagement is effective. In all aspects of this, innovation will be encouraged as a key method of improving communication and engagement.

How we currently involve our communities?

There are many different words used to describe community engagement – 'participation', 'involvement', 'consultation' and 'research' are just a few. All are types of engagement and the range of these are used across Council services.



Informing: We give people information about events, services, policies and decisions which might affect or interest them.

Consulting: We ask people for their opinions about policies and services. In some instances, this consultation is a statutory requirement, for example the Council is required to consult on planning applications. Where this applies, the opportunity for consultees to influence decisions will also be subject to legislative and regulatory provisions.

Involving: We give people opportunities to influence and get involved with decision-making.

Collaborating: We work with communities and the voluntary and community sector to identify strengths and assets and explore how these can be maximized.

Empowering: We give communities the confidence and ability to build their skills to achieve their own outcomes.

Our Principles

We will ensure that people are at the heart of our engagement which will be:

Built on trust
We are committed to being transparent, open and honest, making clear the purpose of the engagement and any limitations.
Inclusive
We will work with businesses, and those that work, live, worship, study and volunteer in the Tendring district. We will make a particular effort to connect with seldom heard communities and those likely to be most affected by any potential change. We will also value existing community engagement arrangements and work with these.
Collaborative
We are committed to bring together groups across our communities and work with partners, as appropriate. The way in which we will collaborate in each area of work will vary and reflect the nature and scope of the project.
Timely
We will allow sufficient time and provide sufficient information and background to permit informed decisions and response. Engagement will take place from the earliest possible stages in the process of developing policy, reviewing a service or making plans for our places.
Reflective
We will both reflect internally on what can be improved on an ongoing basis in our approach to consultation and engagement and seek external evaluation of our activity.
Simple and accessible
Not everyone's needs are the same and so we will provide engagement and consultation in plain language and make materials in a variety of formats to support our varied communities to get involved, where this is required.

Clear and informative
We will provide enough information that is clearly expressed to ensure full and meaningful engagement.
Responsive
We will ensure that any internal or external feedback will be conscientiously taken into account and will be considered in any final decision making, subject to legislative or regulatory guidance. We will publish the results of consultation and engagement activity, stating how many responses were received and how these have been taken into account
Continuously improving
We will demonstrate the impact of any engagement and use what we have learned to improve our approach to involving communities.

The chart below, taken from the National Standards for Community Engagement Scotland illustrates this as a cyclical process:



Future engagement

Through our partnerships, we will work with other organisations, groups and individuals from the community, voluntary and business sectors to make sure that engagement activities influence the future direction of the district.

To achieve this, we will:

- Ensure an organisational culture where all councillors and staff recognise and value the importance of effective engagement and consultation.
- Observe good practice and available guidance.
- Be clear about what we hope to achieve from consultation and not undertake consultation where it is clear that public opinion will not change outcomes - for example when statutory duties must be met.
- Continue to use a variety of community engagement methods to consult and engage with local people – using the most appropriate approach depending on the situation.
- Continue to develop the Council's website and self-serve portal as important, informative and useful engagement tools with the intention that more services become available to the public through self-serve platforms online and through mobile devices.
- Ensure people have a choice about the way in which they communicate with us, for example by letter, email, telephone and also through social media platforms and that we offer a range of appropriate methods for sharing information and communicating with local people. This includes the availability of information in different languages and large print, where this is required.
- Ensure that community engagement activity is well planned and co-ordinated across the Council and that feedback from local people is shared appropriately internally as well as being shared with external partners, whilst taking in to consideration issues of confidentiality and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- Take an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach to working with communities, where applicable. This focuses on strengths, skills and experiences of people within local communities as well as other assets such as community buildings and local community and voluntary groups.
- Continuously seek to identify new and innovative ways to actively and successfully engage local people on an ongoing basis and regularly liaise with other local authorities to identify new areas of good practice.
- Work in partnership to develop initiatives and activities to involve people in improving their neighbourhoods.

Measuring our progress

We will review our position annually to ensure that our aims, objectives and principles are still relevant and appropriate. It is important to know whether this strategy is making a difference and that we are working to our principles.