

Sandwich Town Council
Community Engagement Strategy

1. Introduction

1.1 This document forms the town council's Community Engagement Strategy. It sets out:

- The role of community engagement and its importance;
- How Sandwich Town Council engages the wider community and identifies the needs and aspirations of the community;
- How the town council can improve community engagement.

1.2 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 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 an 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 its priorities and policies are determined and how well it is 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, public service organisations etc) 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, or those with physical disability, language, financial constraints, cultural differences or social expectations. Sometimes organisations do not put enough effort into seeking their views, but it is important to note 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 the council, individuals, voluntary and community groups;
- Clear and open communication to ensure that information is made accessible to all groups;
- Listening and understanding to 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 and a sense of ownership and pride in the new facilities/initiatives;
- It may result in a renewed respect for the council; enhanced leadership and greater interest in elections or for standing for council.

3. Sandwich Town Council and Community Engagement

3.1 The town council currently facilitates community engagement in the following ways:

- Making information on what decisions are being considered and how residents can influence or contribute to the discussions/decisions available (in good time) to enable contributions.

Methods used to ensure this will be the town council website, notice boards, town council newsletter, posters, consultations, word of mouth and easily understandable reports.

- All meetings of the town council and its committees are open to the public and press and there is a period set aside for residents to speak.

Residents can access agendas for meetings via the town council website, town clerk's office, library and notice boards. The town council website, posters and newsletter explain the procedure for residents wishing to speak at meetings. Facilities also exist where residents can, where appropriate or necessary, make written reports or have a case presented on their behalf to councillors.

- 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 allows more flexibility in the service and the personal element of the contact hopefully encourages more involvement from the hard to reach members of the community.

- The town council will produce a quarterly newsletter which will be made available to the community from The Guildhall, Dover District

Council Offices, Sandwich Library, Empire Cinema and the town council website.

- Details of how to contact the town clerk's office will be displayed on notice boards, the town council website and in the quarterly newsletter.
- The town council will continue to produce posters (available from the town clerk's office, town council website, quarterly newsletter and Library) that support the engagement of the community (e.g. Councillors contact details and meeting dates).
- 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 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, where appropriate, ensure local people and communities are referred to the correct department/officer/District or County Councillor 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. This will ensure that the council is kept well informed of the communities' wants and needs.

Unlike other tiers of local government, Town Councillors 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.

4. Communication

4.1 Sandwich 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.
- Sandwich Town Council will be proactive and 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 i.e. housebound and disabled.
- 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 where necessary and appropriate and results will be made available.
- Identifying and embracing opportunities to work with other local community groups, as and when the need arises.
- Publicising the positive results that have been achieved from working relationships between the council and other community groups; in order to encourage new relationships/partnerships to be formed and raise community spirit.
- 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's website www.sandwichtowncouncil.gov.uk and copies of this document will be available for inspection in the Town Clerk's Office.

This document was adopted by the full council on Monday 21st November 2011.