

Community Engagement Strategy

2025-29

Bedford Borough Council would like to build on the work being done by officers, our partners and residents to empower and bring together communities.

This strategy is a resource for all Bedford Borough Council officers to use as a guide, and can be accessed by town and parish councils, voluntary and community sector groups, and residents to provide an overview of:

- What to expect when engaging with the Council
- What the Council's understanding of community engagement is
- Our commitments when planning and delivering community engagement through our agreed principles, objectives, and best practice approaches to community engagement



Foreword from the Chief Executive

At Bedford Borough Council, we believe that for local services to be truly effective, they must reflect the priorities and needs of the people who live here. Engagement is not just about listening; it's about acting on the feedback we receive and ensuring that the community sees the impact of their involvement. By using meaningful engagement methods, we aim to gather the data and insights that will help us make informed, effective decisions that serve all areas of our community.

In an era of tightening resources, it is more important than ever that our services are shaped by the voices of the community. Ensuring that local people feel well informed, have opportunities to influence decision-making, and can express their views about Council policies, service delivery, and our work with partners is essential to this process.

This Community Engagement Strategy is designed to strengthen the positive relationships we've already built and continue improving how we engage with our residents. We will continue learning from our experiences, evaluating our methods, and broadening the range of voices involved—particularly those from under-represented groups

Laura Church

Chief Executive

Bedford Borough Council

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Introduction

Residents, community groups, parish councils, voluntary sector organisations, and local businesses all play a part in shaping our experience of Bedford Borough. This document outlines how Bedford Borough Council aims to engage with our communities, and how we will embed a person-centered and bottom-up approach into service delivery across the Borough.

Community engagement is an umbrella term that describes the ways we can build and sustain trusted relationships between the Council and our local community – It should serve as a catalyst in encouraging open dialogue, helping both the local authority and residents to understand issues within the Borough, and the actions needed to improve the experience of each individual in Bedford Borough.

This document outlines how we will engage with our communities and will underpin how we deliver community engagement and consultation on council decisions and processes. Bedford Borough is rich in diversity, culture, knowledge, and history - it is important that we build relationships with all communities, so that our knowledge of individual lifestyles, needs, and interests are reflective in our services, policies, and strategic approaches.

What to Expect When Engaging with The Council

Our Vision and Objectives for Community Engagement in Bedford Borough

“We create space for our council officers to work with residents, ward, parish and town councillors, service-users, charities, and local organisations to develop inclusive and effective services and policies. Our officers consider the community when making decisions that affect them, and allow individuals and groups to have their voices heard.”

Our strategy will enable Bedford Borough Council to strengthen its best practice, creating room for improved transparency and accountability within the authority.

To help us develop our vision and strategy, we worked with our partners and the wider community to agree our priority outcomes:

- Create and nurture relationships with residents, councillors, and community organisations to build better connectivity between the Council and the community
- Empower communities and harness community power to influence decisions that affect them through fair and informed decision-making processes
- Understand individuals lived experience of their local area and services they use
- Involve communities in engagement activities and programmes that are meaningful, focused and have a clear purpose or outcome.

(Please see page x for further details on each priority outcome)

Our Understanding of Community Engagement

What is Best Practice Community Engagement?

Unlike formal consultation, community engagement can mean different things to different people, and involves many different approaches depending on what the purpose or outcome of the engagement is. It is a planned process, with a specific purpose of

working with identified groups of people (stakeholders), whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest, or affiliation, to influence and participate in decision-making processes. Each community engagement process should have a focus on either:

- **People** – addressing issues that affect the wider community, specific community groups, or individuals that share a specific characteristic
- **Place** – addressing issues that are present, or developments that will be taking place within a specific area (e.g., a hostel, a street, a ward or parish)
- **Policy** – involving communities in a dialogue that informs the direction and/or language used in a policy, framework, plan or strategy.

There are six key areas that we must consider:

- **Inclusion** – We will identify and involve the people and organisations affected by the focus of the engagement, and overcome any barriers to participation
- **Planning** - There is a clear purpose for the engagement, which is based on a shared understanding of community needs and ambitions
- **Working Together** - We will work effectively together to achieve the aims of the engagement
- **Methods** - We will use methods of engagement that are fit for purpose
- **Communication** - We will communicate clearly and regularly with the people and organisations affected by the engagement focus
- **Impact** - We will assess the impact of the engagement and use what has been learned to improve our future engagement, service delivery, and strategic approach.

There are many different levels of participation, and best practice can be embedded into all levels of engagement delivered within the community. Traditionally, Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969) has been used to help local authorities to understand the amount of influence they are giving communities. In recent times, participation and engagement spectrums can be more effective in mapping what different types of engagement can look like.

Bedford Borough Council is committed to increasing levels of participation. In the Participation Spectrum (MutualGain, Sen,A (2021)), the level of citizen power is measured through the scope allowed for participation. Please find the table below to see how Bedford Borough Council interprets the spectrum.

	Enabling Participation	Individual Participation	Group Level Participation	Strategic Level Participation	Social Transformation Participation
What this means to Bedford Borough Council	The Council looks for ways in which it can better enable participation for all. Sometimes this means complying to legal duties (e.g. hearing loops and translated documents), and sometimes this means incorporating learning from previous events or engagement processes.	Residents can easily access information and connect with the right person or department to ask questions or access support in their local area.	Groups of residents are able to raise emerging issues so that new ideas can be explored, or existing services strengthened.	Diverse voices are represented at each of the key decision-making tables where possible, and resources are made available for those representatives to conduct exercises so that they can learn more about the issues that Bedford Borough Council is working to address.	A shared problem-solving approach is welcomed between decision-makers in public services and marginalised groups which is demonstrated through the time and resource allocated.

	Enabling Participation	Individual Participation	Group Level Participation	Strategic Level Participation	Social Transformation Participation
What this looks like within the community	Communications and community engagement are accessible to all residents, as we consider protected characteristics in each decision and reduce barriers to participation.	Officers working within an outreach and/or engagement role are a point of contact when residents would like to get involved in community engagement programs running in the Borough.	Engagement with targeted groups of individuals (ensuring that under-represented and marginalised groups are also represented) to gather data on what is working and what needs to be improved in the community.	Encourage diversity in the Council's panels, partnership boards, and forums that shape services, so that decisions are made by groups reflective of the community of Bedford Borough.	Where possible, the Council will work collaboratively with communities to make decisions.

Our Commitments When Planning and Delivering Community Engagement

Methods of Engagement

We aim to use a range of methods to engage with communities - whether we are informing communities of services, or involving them in conversations that will inform our next steps.

There are varying degrees of engagement, which increase public impact:

1. Inform
2. Consult
3. Involve
4. Collaborate

This public impact spectrum will help Bedford Borough Council officers and decision-makers to identify the level of participation that we would like to achieve, and what methods of engagement are the most suitable within the budget and resources available.

A full explanation of the strengths-based methods of engagement that are listed below will be made available to all staff through an engagement toolkit and training package.

- When **informing** communities, we will use multiple streams to ensure information reaches communities, and that they have access to information about services and education on local issues.
 - *Communities can receive information in various ways, including flyers and posters in local spaces, social media posts through our Facebook and Instagram pages, and through signing up to our e-newsletters.*
- When **consulting** with communities, we will let them know how to have their voice heard, and provide feedback on how their views will be considered or inform decisions.
 - *As well as having formal public consultations available on our website, we consult with communities through public meetings, surveys, and focus groups where appropriate.*

- When **involving** communities in developing services, or policies and strategies, we will invite reflective groups from within the community to engage with us, allowing their concerns and aspirations to shape the process and influence decisions.
 - *When inviting communities into workshops we aim to capture diverse voices through utilising existing networks, forums, and community and resident groups.*
- When **collaborating** with communities, we will partner with stakeholders and residents to support us in developing solutions and ideas.
 - *Where appropriate, we co-produce with communities, looking to local people as experts of their area. We co-produce in a variety of ways including advisory committees and Partnership Boards*

Planning Engagement Effectively

The quality of each engagement experience has a huge impact on the trust and relationships the Council has with residents and organisations in Bedford Borough, and the quality of services. To provide a consistent standard across the Council, the Communities team will;

- Provide advice and guidance to teams across the council to support them to develop their engagement plans
- Promote engagement opportunities online and within the Communities Update, Parish and Town Council, and Consultations newsletters
- Establish a Staff Engagement Network to review engagement plans for more complex or strategic engagement activity before they are finalised, and allow for partnership working across council teams.
- Update and publish the engagement toolkit and offer training to teams across the Council, as well as offer direct support where engagement is likely to be more complex
- Encourage teams to develop engagement plans with key voluntary and community partners where appropriate.

Through engaging with council officers, councillors, partners, voluntary sector organisations, community groups, and residents; we heard that people value transparency, compassion, Inclusion, accessibility and accountability.

These principles that are important to people, align well with and (will be reflected in) Bedford Borough Councils values, which will be considered in all forms of community engagement and will enable us to achieve our engagement objectives.

- **Honesty** – We will work in an open, transparent, and honest way
- **Respectful** – We are kind and respectful to our residents and partners
- **Accountable** – We own our decisions and strive to embrace opportunities to learn
- **Inclusive** – All residents and partners matter, and we want to get better at hearing their voices.

When planning any engagement process, it is important that we ask the following questions:

What is the purpose?

Starting with the end goal in mind, clearly establishing the aims and objectives of the process. What level of engagement are we trying to achieve? As seen in the spectrum of participation, and methods of engagement table; there are varying degrees of engagement that are appropriate in any instance, or at different stages of a decision-making process. We will be led by the purpose of the engagement but will aim to increase public impact wherever possible.

Who should be involved?

It is important that we are clear on who could or should be involved in any given process. We identify who the target audience is/who will be affected by the decisions made, and then think about whether this should involve the wider community or whether there should be a focus on a particular group or community.

What time and resources are available?

Limits on resources and pressures on time affect the type of engagement that is appropriate. We recognise that as a local authority, we must be creative and innovative to be able to deliver meaningful engagement within our budget constraints, and engagement programmes must represent value for money. A key consideration will be ensuring the resources needed are proportional to the issue being consulted on. We will, where possible, explore the possibility of joint engagement processes (utilising existing meetings and/or forums, working with other teams and partners who are speaking with our audience) to reduce costs and the burden on consultees.

Our goal cannot always be for the 'perfect' engagement of the highest public impact, but our goal is to undertake appropriate, effective, and meaningful engagement processes in every instance

How will we evaluate the success and impact of the engagement?

We will consider how we evaluate and monitor who has been reached during an engagement process, and how they have found the experience.

Equality monitoring forms will be used in engagement processes where possible so that we are able to identify any gaps in engagement relating to specific demographics. Generic evaluation and impact forms can be found in the Engagement Toolkit to measure how participants found the process - however, there may be additional markers that are required for the purpose of specific services.

Once a team has reflected on the above questions, and formulated a draft plan for the engagement processes, they should speak with staff members that will be affected and ensure that they have both informed and gathered the views of staff before or alongside any engagement carried out within the community.

Considering Equality Diversity and Inclusion

In line with our (DRAFT) EDI Strategy, council officers will carry out robust Equality Analyses when making decisions about policies, procedures, and services, so that they are reflective and responsive to diverse needs. When planning an engagement process officers will seek advice from their Directorate EDI Champion for guidance on how to complete the equality analysis.

- Services will collect equality data of service users to help identify any disparity to support our services in being accessible to all, especially for marginalised and unrepresented groups
- Policies and strategies will consider all insights that are found through equality analysis.
- Engagement processes will set clear expectations with stakeholders and address accessibility needs on a case-by-case basis to ensure fairness and inclusion

A decision, policy or programme of action can affect a diverse range of people and the Public Sector Duty set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 outlines how the Council has an obligation to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not
- Foster good relations between people/groups in the community who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Effective Delivery

Communication

Best practice community engagement starts with clear communication, which allows us to establish and sustain relationships with partners, councillors, voluntary sector organisations, community groups, and residents across the community. Fostering and maintaining relationships is central to community engagement and is the catalyst to increasing public impact and active citizenship within our borough.

Information on our community engagement processes must be clear and easy to access and understand. It is important that all communications about engagement opportunities are shared in the appropriate formats and timescales, with a clear pathway for communities to access all information relevant to the engagement.

Roles and responsibilities

Whether delivering a focus group or a large workshop, we must have clear roles taken up by those with the right skills to deliver our engagement processes to a high standard. Five key roles in most engagement processes are:

- The Host - Leads the presentations and discussions throughout the event, keeping the process focused and on the right schedule
- The Facilitator - Supports the discussion of the room or table. The Scribe - Records the discussion of the room or table clearly

- The Reporter - Codes and analyses the data from the process, ready to be written into a coherent report that can inform the relevant decision(s)
- The Evaluator Measures the impact of the project by monitoring the effects of the engagement process.

Facilitation

Where conversations are held with communities, we must ensure that delivery staff use facilitation skills to encourage and enable all individuals in the room to participate and feel safe when sharing their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and experiences. A good facilitator will make things easier, enhance people's willingness to get involved, and result in a positive engagement experience for everyone. The key things to remember when facilitating a process are:

- The facilitator is a neutral third party, and should not skew the conversation or debate in any particular direction
- Keep the discussion focused and productive through skillful questioning
- Clarify vague and ambiguous statements, by working with participants to make comments as clear as possible
- Ensure that discussions are balanced and that everyone has had a chance to speak and be heard
- Create a visible and accurate record of the dialogue or comments, capturing complex thoughts in a clear and concise manner

Using active listening skills is the foundation to making people feel heard, and being a good facilitator.

When facilitating we will explore, question, and reframe during every conversation, to enable a relationship built on mutual understanding and respect.

The Communities team will offer facilitation training sessions to officers involved in the delivery of engagement processes, and further information will be included In the Community Engagement Toolkit.

Questioning

Collating the answers needed to inform decisions requires the use of good questioning to bring structure and clarity to the debate. Questioning is especially important in face-to-face conversations, as the facilitator is unable to share their own opinions or correct any factual errors. Effective questioning will:

- Sort facts from feelings
- Break down issues into manageable components
- Identify personal interests/preferences/concerns

When launching surveys or online consultations, we must ensure that questions are well thought-out, and that we have planned the format of the questionnaire to reflect the importance of each piece of information.

For example, if the age of participants is a key factor that is being monitored against responses, this should be included at the start of the survey, so even if the individual does not complete the whole survey, we are aware of how the demographic relates to the question (therefore allowing us to assess need based on the characteristic).

Agreeing the right questions can often dictate how meaningful an engagement process is - whether that be an online survey, or a face-to-face conversation.

Bedford Borough Council will only ask questions where we are open to the answers, and for this reason we will be mindful of using closed questions sparingly, aiming to ask open questions to enable communities to share their views authentically.

Feedback

It is important to inform participants of how their views have been taken into account, the broad findings from the community engagement, and what has happened as a result of the engagement.

At the start of planning an engagement process, we will consider when and how feedback will be provided, and what form this will take. A range of feedback techniques should be considered to make sure that the information is accessible to all.

Feedback should be provided to those who took part in the engagement process, but also provide an overview to the wider community on the engagement process that has taken place, and how it has influenced a decision or service.

Providing good quality, timely feedback is necessary to making sure that participants feel that they have been listened to and their views taken into account. If people feel their views have been considered, then they are more likely to continue to participate in future engagement activities and see this as a worthwhile process.

It is important that we consider the feedback loop:

- **Engaging with communities** - A meaningful engagement process is held (this could be any of the engagement methods listed above)
- **Sharing what we have heard** – We will feedback what was heard to both participants and the wider community, taking feedback to the relevant departments to consider
- **Providing space** - We will let the community know where and when they will find the opportunity to comment further
- **'Following Up'** – We will explain what has been done in light of what was said during the engagement process, as well as explaining why something may not have been done or is not possible.

Priority Outcomes

- 1) Create and nurture relationships with residents, councillors, and community organisations to build better connectivity between the Council and the community.*

Bedford Borough Council is aware that building a trusted relationship with people and groups that have not previously been active within the community is no small task. To create and nurture positive relationships with all, we are committed to working with our councillors, partners, community leaders, voluntary sector organisations, and grassroots groups to reach people from all communities.

As a local authority, we would like to challenge the idea that some areas of the public are 'hard to reach', by ensuring that we invest time and resource in engaging with 'seldom heard' communities. We will work in alignment with this priority by reducing barriers

wherever possible to enable ongoing dialogue between the Council and the communities we serve. Actionable items include (but are not limited to):

- Providing interpreters and/or accessible documents to those from deaf communities
- Provide translators and translated documents wherever possible when engaging with individuals who may not be English speakers
- Providing Easy Read documents to the public, and limiting the use of jargon in council meetings, events, and other publications
- Supporting individuals to access online information
- Ensuring that public engagement meetings are accessible; by either recording sessions, or holding sessions at multiple times to make it easier for more people to attend
- Going to community groups and services to meet residents where they are, when it is unlikely that they will come to us (moving away from the expectation or assumption that community groups will come to us to have their voices heard)
- Signposting individuals to support services wherever needed.

When engaging with residents, we will undertake stakeholder mapping processes, looking at all those who may have an interest in the subject and how best they can be engaged in the process.

2) Empower communities and harness community power to influence decisions that affect them through fair and informed decision-making processes.

Our communications and design team put great efforts in making information and educational materials accessible to the community.

We would like to improve the accessibility of community-focused opportunities to learn about and influence decisionmaking processes by working with partners, service providers, schools, and the voluntary sector to reach residents and encourage them to engage with us.

Through building relationships with our local communities, we can normalise having open dialogue about decisions that affect them. However, it is through building confidence within individuals through clear information and education that communities will feel able to comment, influence, and shape policy and services in collaboration with us.

3) Understanding individuals lived experience of their local area and services they use.

It is important that we recognise local people as the experts on their area and their needs. When we ask residents to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences with us, we must ensure that we code and analyse the data effectively, to be the 'evidence' of the highest importance when shaping services and/or policy.

4) Involve communities in engagement activities and programmes that are meaningful, focused and have a clear purpose or outcome.

We will consider the needs, interest, and ability of the communities that we involve in engagement processes. There are three main types of community:

- Communities of place: where people identify with a defined geographical area. This might be the Borough, a town, a ward, or could be a housing estate or small neighbourhood
- Communities of identity: people who share a particular experience, interest or stake in an issue because of their characteristics or demographic
- Communities of interest: where people share a particular experience or interest in specific topics.

When planning engagement processes, we will be committed to increasing public impact, and ensure that we are transparent with communities about the level of engagement we are using. When communities engage with us, they will have a clear understanding of the purpose of the engagement process, the benefits of becoming involved, and the ability that they have to influence or impact a service or policy decision.

Implementing the Learning and Monitoring Success

After the delivery of an engagement process, we will ensure that we are evaluating not only the data that we have received, but what went well and what can be improved through the engagement process. Evaluation arrangements should be included when planning the engagement process, if it is not, evaluation can be forgotten and overlooked.

Evaluation highlights areas for improvement and allows us to address and improve the way we engage to achieve best practice standards.

In the generic 'Evaluation and Impact Form' that can be found in the engagement toolkit, we have considered collecting information that tells us:

- How diverse the voices were that we have reached?
- Were participants reflective of the wider community?
- How active are participants within the community?
- Have the participants attended previous Council events?
- Did participants feel that their voices were heard?
- Do participants feel more inclined to engage with the Council after participating in the process?
- Do participants feel informed about their area?

By evaluating this data, we can monitor the success of our community engagement processes on an ongoing basis. To achieve our priority outcomes we must allow for evaluation to shape the way we engage with communities, and embed the shared learning into our approach to engagement throughout Bedford Borough Council.

Monitoring the data is also necessary for us to measure and analyse the information we have received through an engagement process.

This can be done by coding and analysing data on a thematic basis, and then working within our teams or collaboratively with elected members, partner organisations, or communities to review the data. Once the data is reviewed, a plan can be formulated of how to implement changes, or findings can be feedback effectively to the community.

Monitoring findings informs future engagement, and again helps us to improve the quality of our engagement and the outcomes that are possible from the engagement process.

Glossary

- **Participation:** Involvement within a decision-making process by ongoing communication and dialogue.
- **Dialogue:** Two-way communication involving active listening.
- **Active Listening:** Listening to understand rather than to 'hear', observing both verbal and non-verbal messages, and then providing appropriate feedback for the sake of showing attentiveness to the message being presented.
- **Asset Mapping:** Creating a map of the physical assets or resources and skills of individuals, groups, organisations within a specific area.
- **Participatory Decision-making:** Allowing others to make the final decision within pre-defined constraints. For example, after deciding the themes that a budget should address, participants are given the power to decide the criteria and then where/to whom the funding is awarded.
- **Discrimination:** the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of any of the 9 protected characteristics (Equality Act, 2010).