

Community Engagement Strategy

Summary Document

Introduction

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

For more detail, please read the full strategy document.

Our Vision and Objectives for Community Engagement

"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."

To help us develop our vision and strategy, we worked with both partners and the wider community to agree our four 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.

What's is Best Practice Community Engagement?

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 – below we have set out how Bedford Borough Council interprets this:

Enabling Participation:

- We will look for ways to enable participation for all. Sometimes this means complying to legal duties by translating documents or using accessible venues, and sometimes this means learning from previous events
- Communications and community engagement are accessible to all residents, as we consider protected characteristics in each decision and reduce barriers to participation.

Individual Participation:

- Residents can easily access information and connect with the right department to ask questions or access support, as all officers working within an engagement role are a point of contact for the community.

Group Level Participation:

- Groups of residents are able to raise emerging issues so that new ideas can be explored, or existing services strengthened as we engage 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 improving for communities.

Strategic Level Participation:

- Decisions are made by groups that are reflective of the community and diverse voices are represented at key decision making tables as we encourage diversity in the Councils panels, partnership boards, and forums that shape services.

Social Transformation Participation:

- A shared problem-solving approach is welcomed between decision makers and marginalised groups as the Council normalises working with communities to embed a bottom-up approach into policies, strategies, and services.

Methods of Engagement

We aim to use a range of methods to engage with communities. Below, we have set out the possible modes of engagement with stakeholders and communities. It shows the increasing level of public impact from ‘inform’ (enabling participation) through to ‘empower’ (creating social transformation).

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 within the full strategy document will be made available to all staff through an engagement toolkit and training package.

Inform: Provide communities with information to assist their understanding of an issue. We ensure that communities have access to information, and we place an importance on educating communities on local issues, both positive and negative.

Consult: collect data from communities about attitudes and opinions by allowing them to have their voices heard through surveys, public meetings, and focus groups.

Involve: Invite reflective groups from within the community to engage with us, and allow for their concerns and aspirations shape the process and influence decisions.

Collaborate: Co-produce with communities, looking to local people and services for help in developing solutions, and incorporate their recommendations as much as possible.

Planning Engagement Effectively

The quality of every engagement experience impacts 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 Communications and 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 make training available 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

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

- Honesty
- Accountability
- Respect
- Inclusivity

Effective Delivery

Best practice community engagement starts with clear communication. 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.

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.

Collating the answers needed to inform decisions requires the use of good questioning to bring structure and clarity to the debate. 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.

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.

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.

In the generic 'Evaluation and Impact Form', 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?