Redditch Borough Council

Community Engagement Strategy

2021-2025

Title	Redditch Borough Council Community Engagement Strategy 2021-2025
Description	This Strategy sets out our commitment for progressing engagement over the next four years.
Created by	Engagement and Equalities Advisor
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1. Introduction

Redditch Borough Council wants to ensure that local people feel well informed about local issues, have opportunities to get involved, influence local decision making and to tell the Council what they think about its policies, procedures, service delivery and work with partner organisations. For Council services to be delivered effectively, particularly in times of reducing resources, it is vital that these services are shaped and prioritised by the people who live in the Borough of Redditch.

The purpose of this Community Engagement Strategy is to continue building on the good practices and the positive relationships that already exist within the Council. This Strategy seeks to improve the quality of our activities, learn from our experiences by evaluate the ways we are engaging with local people, especially following the impact of Covid, and to continue increasing the number and diversity of people who engage with the Council.

For the Council to understand different views within the community, ensuring that the needs of groups or areas that are under-represented or do not traditionally engage with us are not overlooked, is important. By identifying the gaps in data, the Council can start to understand the barriers that might be stopping certain voices being heard. We also need to use the most appropriate engagement technique/s so we get meaningful data to make better decisions and meet the needs of our communities more effectively.

Community engagement is a powerful tool that can provide invaluable information and help to build confidence within the community but only if it is conducted in a meaningful manner; engagement must always have a purpose and we must be able to demonstrate the impact the responses have had on our decision making. So, by undertaking meaningful engagement and encouraging community involvement the Council and the community can work together to improve and sustain services that matter most locally.

2. Definitions

a) What do we mean by community engagement?

Community engagement is about giving people the confidence, skills, and power so they can get involved, shape and influence the planning, development, and delivery of services. Delivering engagement activities can take many different forms and the level of involvement can vary greatly. One way to think about community engagement is as a set of five steps ranging from informing e.g., providing information, right up to empowering e.g., having decision making responsibilities.
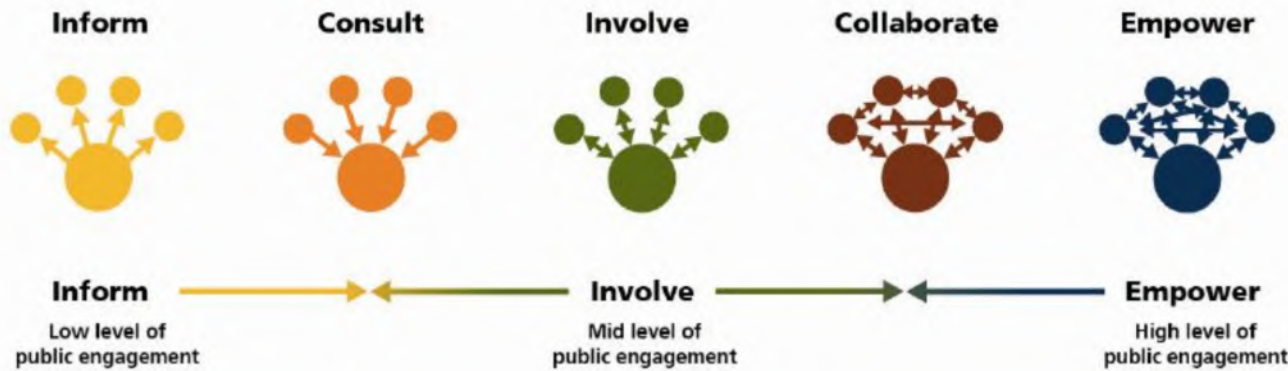
Every type of involvement is important in the community engagement process and different methods will be used depending on the activity and circumstances. Sometimes it may be appropriate to inform or consult on some activities, while at other times involving communities and individuals in much greater depth would be more appropriate.

The Five Steps of Engagement				
Informing	**Consulting**	**Involving**	**Collaborating**	**Empowering**
Providing information to communities to enable them to understand problems, alternatives, opportunities, and solutions.	Obtaining community feedback to inform decision making. Obtaining feedback on formal proposals.	Working directly with the community to ensure that issues, concerns, and aspirations are understood and considered.	Working in partnership with the community on all aspects of decision-making including development of options and identifying preferred solutions.	Placing final decision making in the hands of the community.
The intention is to…				
Keep the community informed.	Keep the community informed, listen to their views and provide feedback on how their input influenced decision making.	Engage with the community to ensure that concerns and aspirations are reflected in decisions and service delivery. Provide feedback to the community on how their input influenced decision making.	Look to the community for advice and innovation to find solutions. We will incorporate locality contributions to the maximum extent.	Facilitate communities to take responsibility for designing and delivering services themselves.
Techniques…				
Brochures, websites, news releases and newsletters to raise awareness. For example: Council Tax information leaflet, council website, Facebook, or Twitter	Annual surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, telephone, postal or face to face (interview) surveys, using social media, e-mail, website, SMS mobile or Facebook surveys.	User panels e.g., planning for area forums, public meetings, citizens panel, local member/councillor surgeries or network meetings.	Community needs analysis, focus groups or service user forums.	User led commissioning e.g., delegated budgeting, community asset transfer or direct service delivery.

b) What do we mean by community?

A community is not always determined by a geographical area; therefore, understanding how the community is defined is key to planning and delivering effective engagement. Ways to define a community include:

Community of place or neighbourhood: A community linked to a particular geographical location such as a ward, village, market town or a housing estate. This location will usually have physical boundaries although they are not always obvious to people who do not live there.

Community of interest: A group of people with a shared interest or experience. A community of interest includes service users (for example, tenants of the council) as well as people interested in a particular issue (for example climate change).

Community of identity: A community that is defined by how people identify themselves or how they are identified by society, usually by demographic characteristics (for example, young people, faith groups, older people, black and minority ethnic people, lesbian, gay, Bisexual, and transgender people).

Generally, people do not associate themselves to just one community, but to several different communities at any one time. This can relate to where they live, work and their interests. So, it is important to let people define for themselves which communities they wish to be identified with.

3. Legal standards

Certain functions of the Council are subject to statutory requirements to consult and there is specific legislation that needs to be taken account of, including the Local Government Act 1999 and the Equalities Act 2010. Community Engagement is particularly important when making difficult financial decisions; if we are proposing to stop, reduce or change a service then we need have relevant evidence as to how we have engaged with communities who are potentially affected by the proposal.

Common Law (Doctrine of legitimate expectation) taken from New Conversations 2.0 LGA Guide to Engagement 2019
It is now seen as common law that consultees have the right to expect a fair process which incorporates guidance and management promises.

The legitimate expectation applies:

- When there has been a clear promise of consultation.
- Where official guidance or policies imply a promise to act in a particular way.
- Where there is a withdrawal of a benefit with significant impacts to be considered.
- Where the nature of the relationship would create unfairness if there were to be inadequate consultation.

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Where people have come to legitimately expect a process of consultation there are grounds for a judicial review should a public consultation not take place. A consultation must also be conducted properly should the choice be taken to embark on one (whether a legal requirement exists for it or not).

The Gunning Principles (1985) define that a consultation is only legitimate when these four principles are met:

1. **Proposals are still at a formative stage.**
   A final decision has not yet been made, or predetermined, by the decision makers.

2. **There is sufficient information to give 'intelligent consideration'.**
   The information provided must relate to the consultation and must be available, accessible, and easily interpretable for consultees to provide an informed response.

3. **There is adequate time for consideration and response.**
   There must be sufficient opportunity for consultees to participate in the consultation. The length of time given for consultee to respond can vary depending on the subject and extent of impact of the consultation.

4. **'Conscientious consideration' must be given to the consultation responses before a decision is made.**
   Decision-makers should be able to provide evidence that they took consultation responses into account.

The Gunning Principles have formed a strong legal foundation from which the legitimacy of public consultations is assessed and are frequently referred to as a legal basis for judicial review decisions.

4. Benefits of effective community engagement

There are benefits to both the council and the community when engagement activities are delivered well.

Community engagement helps the Council to:

- better understand and respond to the needs of local people.
- be more accountable to local people.
- plan and deliver better services.
- make more efficient use of public resources.
- take transparent decisions based on strong evidence.
- build strong and positive relationships within and between local communities.
- test out ideas and explore emerging issues.

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- measure the performance of the Council in delivering services.

The local community will:

- have a greater say and choice in the design and delivery of local services.
- develop new skills and expertise.
- become better informed about the Council's work.
- have better and more accessible conversations about the issues that matter to them.
- build trust and confidence with the council.
- know how their participation and engagement has contributed to decision making processes.

However, engagement activities which are done badly can lead to misleading results, undermine the whole process and reduce the prospect that people will engage again. Engaging with the public when a decision has already been made is pointless and could mean that relevant and potentially costly issues are missed. It is much easier to address issues before decisions have been made as they can be incorporated into a new service design or policy proposal.

There are also times when community engagement is not appropriate, for example:

- If the decision is under strict direction from Government.
- If we have already recently asked for views on a similar topic.
- If the Council is in the process of implementing plans that have previously been adopted and to which it has committed significant resources.

5. Delivering this strategy

a) Our aim and objectives

The aim of the strategy is to 'ensure that local people feel well informed about local issues, have opportunities to get involved, influence local decision making and to tell the Council what they think about its policies, procedures, service delivery and work with partner organisations'.

The following objectives set out how we are going to make certain that our engagement activity is flexible, focused, and appropriate for the diverse needs of the communities. Together the council will:

1. **Plan and co-ordinate** activities, the use of resources and, where possible, work collaboratively.
2. **Actively encourage involvement** from all communities, including those from traditionally under-represented groups/areas.

3. **Be open and creative** to the most appropriate methods to consult and engage making the experience interesting, relevant, and worthwhile for participants.
4. **Be transparent and build trust** by communicating results and ensure that the outcomes are used to inform the Council's policies and decision-making processes.
5. **Use the information** from our engagement activities, alongside other evidence, to inform the design and delivery of effective and efficient services, within our current financial constraints.
6. **Build relationships with communities** so sustained engagement can be established.

b) Roles and responsibilities

Community Engagement is the responsibility of the whole Council because ensuring that we understand the issues affecting our residents and customers is essential if we are to deliver effective and targeted services. This is particularly relevant when making difficult financial decisions; if we are proposing to stop, reduce or change a service then we must have the relevant evidence to justify this. This is where community engagement linked to other areas such as system performance, communications, equalities, and customer service.

Corporate engagement activities will involve key officers and stakeholders to ensure that these opportunities provide the Council with the most relevant and timely evidence possible.

Targeted community engagement must be led by the relevant service area as they are the experts in their field, enabled by the Policy Team, who can support with the development, implementation, and analysis of engagement activities. Community engagement also forms a statutory requirement for service areas such as community safety, planning (articulated through the Statement of Community Involvement) and housing services, in the Council's role as a landlord (requirements under the HCA Tenant Involvement & Engagement Standard will be set out in a separate strategy).

Elected Members are a key part of engagement with communities; managers and the Policy Team can support Councillors with engagement activities and the scrutiny process allows formal consultation and engagement to inform and influence decision making.

c) Delivering community engagement after Covid

During the COVID-19 crisis, Redditch Borough Council, along with many others, has had to find new ways to communicate and deliver its services at an unprecedented level and pace. Whether it is supporting officers to work from home, holding online meetings, recruiting volunteers to support the shielding, helping local communities respond to the challenges or engaging with business about decisions on opening, the council has had to adapt to a new way of working and technology has played a big part in this.

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Issues that have affect our communities.

The pandemic has affected people in many ways. For some the impact will be less and short lived but for others the affect of the pandemic will have devastated lives, mentally, physically and/or financially e.g., isolation, poor mental and physical health, financial difficulties, unemployment. For the council, undertaking community engagement with all community groups and across geographical areas is important now more than ever. Gathering information and data, from now and over the coming years, will enable us to direct services and resources ensuring that those most in need are supported.

The use of technology for community engagement

Since the beginning of 2020, the advance in the use of new platforms to communicate has been profound, with many people using digital methods to communicate, hold meetings and enable ongoing learning. As we move forward, many businesses and organisations are reviewing how they conduct their work and how the use of technology will continue. For the council, one area these platforms will enhance is its future delivery of community engagement activities.

Digital Engagement uses digital tools and techniques to find, listen to and mobilise a community around an issue or to start a conversation.

Alongside the more traditional methods such as paper/online surveys or face to face meetings, the method of digital engagement has and will be a tool that the Council makes much more use. We have found by using methods such as online community meetings, there has been an increase in engagement and levels of participation. People can access from wherever they are located, utilising computers or mobile technologies, which has made previous barriers such as travel, childcare or working hours easier to overcome. Despite this, we are very mindful of digital exclusion and will not be using digital methods as the only tool to ensure that certain people or groups are not being left behind and have an opportunity to engage with us.

6. Measuring our progress

It is important to know whether this strategy is making a difference and that we are working to meet our aim and objectives. To help know this we have set out the following action plan which will shape the detailed activity we undertake over the next 4 years:

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Our Aim	
'Ensure that local people feel well informed about local issues, have opportunities to get involved, influence local decision making and to tell the Council what they think about its policies, procedures, service delivery and work with partner organisations'.	
Objectives	**Key Actions**
Plan and co-ordinate activities, the use of resources and, where possible, work collaboratively.	• Identify a key officer from each council departments that will support and inform the Policy Team about departmental engagement activities. • The Policy Team to map out departmental and corporate engagement activities and keep key officers, managers and Heads of Service updated. • Undertake regular horizon scanning.
Actively encourage involvement from all communities, including those from traditionally under-represented groups/areas.	• Undertake stakeholder mapping, working with the voluntary and community sector. • Tailor our methods of engagement to meet the specific needs of communities. • Undertake engagement at a local, sub-borough level, in partnership with Elected Members and communities.
Be open and creative to the most appropriate methods to consult and engage making the experience interesting, relevant, and worthwhile for participants.	• Go to where the communities are and use platform they use and formats they are comfortable with. • Provide support to council officers through an engagement toolkit • Where appropriate use the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Approach.
Be transparent and build trust by communicating results and ensure that the outcomes are used to inform the Council's policies and decision-making processes.	• The results of all engagement activities are made available to the public. • Improve how the council demonstrates the impact of engagement on the decision-making process.
Use the information from our engagement activities, alongside other evidence, to inform the design and delivery of effective and efficient services, within our current financial constraints.	• Undertake key corporate consultations including an annual community survey to inform key strategic planning. • Improve how we utilise engagement data in the delivery of our services.
Build relationships with communities so sustained engagement can be established.	• Support the development of a refreshed Redditch Community Forum. • Maintaining an ongoing dialogue with representatives of our communities to build unconditional and mutually supportive relationships.

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7. How to contact us

If you would like to give us your views, get involved or for any further information please contact the Policy Team at

equalities@bromsgroveandredditch.gov.uk or 01527 548284.

To find out about the council's engagement activities please contact us or just go to www.redditchbc.gov.uk/consultations

If you need this information in another language or format, please contact us to discuss how we can best meet your needs.

Email: equalities@bromsgroveandredditch.gov.uk or Phone: 01527 548284

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