

Community Engagement Strategy

The primary aim of Bewdley Town Council is to improve the quality of life for residents through the provision of appropriate services.

It is therefore important that the Town Council communicate, consult and engage ensuring this is undertaken in an open, direct and trustworthy way.

The purpose of this strategy is to set out how the Council intends to achieve this by developing and improving its future communication ensuring interaction with the whole community to best represent their interests.

Current communications include the website, regular contributions to local publications, social media, noticeboard displays, consultation and an Annual Report.

The overall aim is to make council communications a two-way process: providing information that the community can accurately understand, enabling the council to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.

Understanding the needs of different groups within the community is an important role of the council and council members. Occasionally the Council needs to make difficult decisions about issues that impact the community in an open and reasoned way, it is therefore its responsibility to be well informed about diverse local issues. A council cannot represent the interests of electors without consulting with them.

Why is communication Important?

Local government communications have increasingly focused on reputation. Improved communications lead to recognition and respect – reputation **does** matter.

Through good communication the Town Council will understand and better meet the needs of the community, whilst also raising the profile of the town and the Town Council.

Good communications will enable the Council to:

- Better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities
- Raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence by communicating about services provided by the Council
- Raise the profile of Bewdley
- Attract businesses/employment to the town
- Make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people
- Proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the brand image or integrity of the Council

There are methods in which people can express hopes and wishes for their community providing valuable opportunities for local people to identify features of the Town that need improving or are worth protecting. They stimulate discussion; they inform and influence the decision makers and usually lead to action.

What should be communicated?

There are two methods of communication:

- Proactive – telling people information to influence and change attitudes
- Reactive – giving residents information they have requested

It is recognised that the most important drivers of council reputation among residents are:

- Perceived quality of available services
- Perceived value for money
- Media coverage
- Direct communications
- Council performance
- A clean, green and safe environment
- Positive experiences of contact with council employees

If the Council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage and improve customer satisfaction then these drivers must form the basis of its' proactive and reactive communications.

Who should the Town Council Communicate with?

To assist and influence Town Council decisions, it aims to identify and involve the people and organisations with an interest in the Town, including but not exclusively:

- Residents of all ages
- Elderly Groups: Residential Nursing Home
Sheltered Accommodation Residents
- Schools & Youth Groups: St Anne's C of E Primary School
Bewdley Primary School
The Bewdley School
Bewdley Scouts (Cubs) & Guides (Brownies)
Pre-school groups including nurseries
- Religious Organisations: St Anne's and All Saints Church
Bewdley Baptist Church
Bewdley Methodist Church
Holy Family Catholic Church
Riverside Elim Church
Bewdley Quakers
- Social & Sports Groups: Bewdley Tennis Club
Bewdley Golf Clubs – Pines & Wharton Park
Bewdley football Club
Bewdley Cricket Club
Wribbenhall Social Club
- Social Recreational Groups
- Bewdley businesses: All retail outlets (based in & around the town centre)
All Town-based office businesses
Public Houses
- Professional services: Doctor's surgery
Dental surgeries
Other supportive health-care services
- Police and law enforcement: Safer Neighbourhood Team

Support

The Town Council will identify any barriers to involvement and will attempt wherever possible to overcome them. Barriers to involvement will take a variety of forms depending on the activity planned: for instance, the Town council is aware of low turn-out to Town council meetings and will therefore try to encourage greater turn-out.

The Council will ensure that information is easily accessible, relevant and timely. It recognises the importance of communication and commits to meet the expectations of the community it serves.

To encourage greater participation, the Town council will ensure access to information about its services is freely available.

Different forms of communication will appeal to different ages, social groups and demographics so it is important to ensure that within reason, all options for increasing communication and participation are considered to communicate effectively with everyone. The advances made in information technology offer exciting new ways of communicating. At the same time, for many people, traditional methods – newspapers, telephone and leaflets – still play a fundamental role that must not be undervalued.

It is recognised that some members of the community are more difficult to reach than others; and to this end the Town Council aim to promote alternative methods of engagement where possible. Those with limited knowledge or no access to the internet may receive visits by prior appointment i.e. Sheltered Housing residents and in Residential Care Homes. Other ways to converse with groups that rarely engage may involve further scrutiny, for example, special needs, ethnicity, social isolation and disability, however, to achieve the council's aims supporting inclusivity for all, it will endeavour to work with other agencies, groups and organisations to deliver this where possible.

Council members will be expected to promote the Town Council when and where appropriate to encourage understanding of the council's aims.

How should the Town Council Communicate?

Currently communication is achieved through:

- Town Council Office
- The Council's website and Facebook page
- Council agenda papers/correspondence
- Councillor interaction
- Issue specific consultation
- Annual Town Meeting
- Press releases

Ways in which communication could be improved:

- Improved visibility of the Council and its activities by more frequent reporting
- Inviting residents to be actively involved in council meetings during the time set aside for public discussion
- Improved communication by means of attending meetings of community organisations and Safer Neighbourhood team
- Improve relations by Councillors taking up places on community groups and organisations
- Continue to improve the Council's website to make it more user friendly including capturing data for a communication database
- Increased use of social media
- Active involvement in various networking organisations
- Regular consultation with the community and feedback to them on subsequent analysis including actions resulting from the consultation
- Strive towards achieving Quality Award under the Local Council Award Scheme

Press Involvement

The media play a strong role in shaping perceptions of local councils, so informed reporting is vital. It is recognised that people are more positive about their Council where it has a good relationship with local media. Whilst good relationships already exist, there is always room for improvement.

Key points for effective management of media relations:

- Respond to journalists in full within a reasonable time
- Be helpful, polite and positive
- Never say “no comment”, speculate or gossip
- Ensure a full understanding of the question before answering. In the event of any indecision refer to the Council as a whole.
- Ensure all statements or responses to hostile enquiries have council approval
- Evaluate media coverage
- Issue timely and relevant press releases
- Pre-empt potential stories arising from Council agendas/minutes by issuing proactive PR (where possible)
- Ensure all media contact is with the Town Clerk or Chairman (or in their absence, the Vice Chairman)
- Issues **not** to be discussed are a) legal issues, b) personnel issues, c) questions involving council integrity or d) emergency situations

Online Presence and Social Media

The council’s website is regularly maintained and updated. It is important to outline strategies for regular website maintenance ensuring good links with local businesses and community groups. The Town council has a social media policy that is available to view on the council’s website. All communications should promote the Council’s website and, if appropriate, its social media accounts.

Planning Standard

For any Town council consultation, project or event, the Town Council will identify through the gathering of evidence, the needs and available resources to agree the purposes, scope and timescale of the engagement and the actions to be taken.

Evidence may be gathered by direct contact with the likely participants face-to-face, telephone, letter or e-mail; by newsletter article seeking feedback; observational, non-interactive survey, questionnaires, focus groups, workshops or community conferences and consultation. Consultation will take place to engage with the whole community to establish its needs and how they should be developed with any information gathered providing useful evidence to support initiatives and funding bids. Any consultation will also help to better understand the Council’s strengths and weaknesses and measure the effectiveness of its work. Consultations need to be developed in such a way that there is an opportunity for all members of the community to engage in the process.

The format of consultation needs to consider:

- **Who** – develop an understanding of the demographics of the community?
- **How** – establish ways of communicating with each of these that best encourages their engagement in the process
- **What** – consider what information is required and develop relevant means of achieving this whilst still being appropriate, accessible and engaging
- **Where** – define the best locations for accessing and engaging with the different groups identified
- **When** – develop a timetable for the consultation process including when it is intending to hold consultation ‘events’

Who should carryout engagement?

Staff and Councillors are ambassadors of the Council and in all communications will;

- be courteous, timely, professional, appropriate and reflect the decisions and policies of the Council

- ensure that every piece of communication reflects the reputation of the council in the eyes of the community

Methods Standard

The Town Council will use methods of engagement that stand up to scrutiny. As all people respond differently to the various media methods, where possible an attempt will be made to convey the same message in different ways to ensure the best coverage and not seek to unfairly discriminate against any person or group.

- All Town council meetings are open to the public.
- Town Council meetings are advertised on the website and the locked noticeboard.
- The Town council office is open to the public by appointment – opening hours are publicised on the website and social media.
- The Town council’s website is kept up-to-date and is available 24/7.
- The Town council’s noticeboard is kept up to date with relevant information.
- The Town council’s community notice board is available to all to post information inside at a small charge.
- The Town Council will seek to use groups and schemes within its means to deliver and request information. For example; Age UK, all schools in Bewdley, The churches, community groups and other local organisations.
- The Annual Town Meeting – This is a meeting hosted by the Town Council for electors in Bewdley to discuss ‘Town affairs’.
- Information will be provided in plain English and jargon-free.
- The Town Council appoints representatives to other public bodies.
- Town Council members are trained in their role, happy to talk about the council and positively promote its aims.
- Town Council employee(s) are trained in their role, will always uphold the council’s principles and positively promote its aims.

Roles and Communication Defined

Council members and staff will be required to communicate regularly with the community and outside bodies as part of their duties. How enquiries from the public are dealt with will reflect on the Council. The Town Clerk has overall responsibility for communications and will ensure that;

- written communication will be provided with council contact details to be used solely for the purpose of conducting Council business.
- all email communication will include an electronic ‘signature’ detailing their name, position and contact information, unless responding to a previous email train.
- guidance will be offered when any council member is in doubt how to respond to an enquiry.
- verbal communication will always be handled with courtesy and professionalism.
- training will be given to staff and members to offer guidance when handling difficult, angry or vexatious complaints.

Procedural Communication Guidance for Councillors

At no time should promises be given to the public about any matter raised other than a promise to investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to the Town Council. Depending on the issue raised it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in the following ways:

- Refer the matter to the Town Clerk who will deal with it as appropriate
- Request an item on a relevant agenda
- Investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Town Clerk

All communication **must** be responded to and the correspondent kept apprised of progress. The procedure for doing so is as follows:

- Having received an enquiry/complaint, the Councillor should acknowledge receipt (in writing) and advise of what action is intended to be taken
- Advise when that action has been taken and what to expect next (i.e. a response is awaited from a third party)
- Report back on the outcome of the enquiry or ensure that either the third party or the Town Clerk will/has report(ed) back on the matter

Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on Council related matters reflect the decisions and policies of the Council regardless of the Councillor's own views on the subject.

All enquires by the media should be referred immediately to the Town Clerk or Chairman of the Council.

Working Together

The Town Council will agree and use clear procedures to encourage efficient and effective co-operative working practices.

- All verbal agreements will be supported in writing to ensure no misunderstandings.
- Methods of communication will depend on the situation and the individual's preferences and will be either in writing (e-mail, letters, reports), telephone or face-to-face.
- Language will be in plain, jargon-free English.
- Collaboration with residents, other public bodies and all stakeholders working to improve, enhance and benefit the Town, will be welcomed and encouraged.
- Meetings, other than scheduled council meetings, may be held at times to suit the attendees and in a place that will accommodate the number attending.
- Contact details of the Town council and each member, where appropriate, are available on the website and from the Town council office.

Sharing Information

The Town Council will ensure necessary information is communicated to those who need to know.

- The Town Council is registered with the Information Commission and must comply with the twin principles of Freedom of Information and Data Protection. The Town Council's Publication Scheme details available council information accessible to the public from the council office and on the website.
- General information is published on the website.
- Agendas and draft minutes are published on the website
- Agendas are displayed in the locked notice board.
- Draft minutes of all Town council and committee meetings will be published within one month of the meeting; agendas will be published at least three clear days in advance of the day of the meeting.
- The Town Council will maintain a database of contact e-mail addresses, of those who have given permission to do so, circulating items of interest.
- Town Council staff are available to the public to answer queries and record matters of concern.
- The Town council's website has a facility for residents to report council issues which will be dealt with promptly and appropriately.
- Notwithstanding the statutory requirement to comply with Freedom of Information requests, the Town Council will aim to respond to all requests for information, advice and support within five working days.

Working with Other Agencies

The Town Council will identify and work effectively with others who may be interested in engagement or able to provide a supportive benefit to the outcome.

- The Town Council values and will continue to invite and encourage participation and input from the County and District ward representatives.
- The Town Council will retain links with council tiers and wider local government network to draw in support and guidance when required.
- The Town Council will work with other tiers of local government to provide maximum benefit to residents; this may include taking on additional services in the face of restrictions to County Council and District Council budgets.
- The Town Council will encourage regular communication with the police via the Safer Neighbourhoods Team and Community Support Officers.
- Using local knowledge, the Town Council will seek and encourage specific individuals known for their capabilities to contribute support and advise as relevant.
- Wherever possible the Town Council will seek to establish and maintain links to all members of society within the Town irrespective of age, disability, race, religion, sexuality, gender and gender identification, and will strive to overcome any barriers to equality.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The Town Council will monitor and evaluate the success of the engagement strategy ensuring that it meets its purpose against any applicable national standards.

The strategy will be measured to inform any future plan and create a comparative for future development.

- The Town Council will set targets for each community engagement project it undertakes and upon completion of the project will review these targets.
- Evaluation of each engagement project will be honest and open to allow for clear understanding as to the effectiveness and benefit of engagement.
- Appreciation of the benefit of each community engagement project will not depend solely on value for money.
- Any consultations carried out by the Town Council will be standardised to carry out comparison more easily with previous and future projects.

What communication improvements can be measured?

- Media's assessment of Bewdley Town Council's communication coverage
- Raised awareness of the Town Council and the services it provides
- Attitudes of all stakeholders towards the Town Council
- Participation and engagement with council projects, initiatives and consultation processes
- Increased attendance at public meeting and organised events.

How will this be achieved?

- Consultation with residents – perception and satisfaction surveys
- Measure press coverage for saturation and against press releases for content usage
- Number of visits to the website
- Number of Likes and Followers on Social Networking sites

Improvement

The Town Council will encourage the development of the skills, knowledge and confidence of all participants engaging with the Town Council.

- The Town Council will treat all approaches by residents with respect and in cases of concern and hardship will always endeavour to seek a beneficial outcome.

- All members of staff will be required to understand the council's priorities and recognise the importance of all communication from residents.
- The Town Council will aim to identify all community groups and endeavour to reach out to all in its mission to deliver community needs and desires.
- Training for Town council members and staff will be ongoing and tailored to the individual; a training audit to identify individual needs will be completed annually.
- Non-council members of committees and working groups will be provided with information as required to support and build on their knowledge base.

Feedback

The Town Council will feedback the results of any engagement exercise to the wider community and agencies impacted.

- Feedback will be communicated either verbally to individuals or at meetings, in writing such as emails, website, social media, letters and newsletters.
- The Town Council may also contact local media to share any feedback more widely.