



Community Engagement Policy

**Adopted by Full Council
23 February 2021**

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY

What is Community Engagement?

Bletchley & Fenny Stratford Town Council (BFSTC) defines community engagement as a two-way process which allows the public to talk to the Council about their views and needs and in return enables the Council to tell the community about its work, priorities and how well it is performing.

It is concerned with giving local people a voice and involving them in decisions which affect them and their community. Community engagement may include individuals, community groups, businesses and other public bodies.

The Council's Commitment

BFSTC recognises its responsibilities to provide community leadership, to promote the democratic process and to undertake activities that serve the community of Bletchley and Fenny Stratford.

The council aims to make decisions ethically taking into account the social, economic and environmental well-being of the whole community. Therefore, we want effective engagement with as many people and organisations living or working here as possible. This document sets out both the general principles of the council's commitment to community engagement and a specific communications plan.

Objectives

The objectives of this policy are:

1. To encourage and promote effective local community engagement
2. To ensure that all councillors and officers understand the need to engage with the community about decisions which affect them
3. To enable feedback obtained from the community to have an impact on decision making and service delivery
4. To identify the types and limits of current community engagement activities and to specify the principles which will be used
5. To specify an annual communications plan

Principles of Community Engagement

BFSTC will work to **inform**, **consult** and **involve** its community using the following principles:

Information Principles

The Council will **inform** the community about decisions made or to be made, policies, activities and services affecting Bletchley and Fenny Stratford and the wider area

1. Information will be provided through a range of different media aiming to target all sections of the community
2. Information will be as accessible as possible to all groups in the community
3. Information will be factually correct and free from political bias
4. Procedures for obtaining information will be well publicised and information will be provided in a timely way
5. The Council will comply with all relevant legislation including but not limited to the Data Protection Act 2018, Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Localism Act 2011, Local Government Transparency Regulations.
6. In some specific circumstances it will not be possible to provide all the information which members of the community may want

Consultation Principles

Bletchley and Fenny Stratford Town Council will **consult** with the community when there is a genuine opportunity for the community to influence decisions of the Council or other bodies

1. Consultation activities will be time-limited and specific and will be well advertised allowing people and organisations sufficient time to participate
2. A range of different consultation methods will be used depending on the issue to be consulted upon
3. The council will be clear at the start of a consultation activity what output is expected and it will always be clear before the start of any participation or consultation event to what extent the output will inform a decision
4. Consultation activities may be targeted at a relevant group or groups
5. Specific but non-leading questions will be asked.
6. Care will be taken to ensure that no one voice is given greater weight than any other

7. Consultation outputs will be published by the council, if the outcome of a consultation or participation event is intended to inform a decision and a different decision is taken the reasoning behind that decision will be published openly.
8. Consultation will not take place if:
 - a decision is subject to strict direction from Government
 - a decision on the matter had already been made and nothing would be gained from consultation (or the Council's room for manoeuvre is so limited that any consultation would be meaningless)
 - there are more efficient ways of gathering data to inform the decision making

Involvement Principles

Bletchley and Fenny Stratford Town will **involve** the community through events, meetings and discussions and through partnership working on projects

1. The council cannot force any individual or group to become involved but it will try to make involvement easy and as enjoyable as possible
2. The council will make clear, before the start of any involvement, the purpose of the involvement and the extent to which that involvement will inform a decision and if a decision is not in conformity with the consultation output then the reasoning for the decision will be made public
3. Not every decision of the council will require consultation or community involvement

Data Collection

All information requested and provided will be lawful and fair handling of personal data will be in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and other relevant current legislation.

Community Engagement Opportunities

The council currently facilitates community engagement in the following ways:

- Allocation of public speaking time at the beginning of each council and committee meeting providing an opportunity for local people to ask questions or make representations relating to items on the agenda
- Publication of all agendas, minutes and supporting documents for all council meetings on the website and in the case of agendas on various notice boards
- Community involvement in the annual town meeting through a public question time and the opportunity to put forward proposals for discussion

- Publication of news about local events, council activities and developments on the BFSTC website and associated social media platforms eg Facebook and Twitter
- Publicity about the annual audit procedure which provides a formal opportunity for inspection of the council's accounts
- Publication of the annual accounts, governance statement and external audit on the website and noticeboards, a summary of the accounts is also provided at the annual town meeting and via the annual report to the community
- Making Councillors' contact details available on the website and on noticeboards around the town
- Consultation exercises, surveys and questionnaires may be undertaken with residents, young people and local user groups for specific projects
- Regular news releases sent to the local news media to keep the public informed
- Members of the Council act as representatives on outside bodies eg community groups, local organisations and regularly attend meetings
- Council offices are usually open to the public daily from Monday to Friday for enquiries
- An officer is always available during office opening hours and the Town Clerk is available by appointment on request from any member of the community
- The Council works directly with the community and supports organisations and individuals seeking grants, setting up new projects and delivering services in the community
- Events and activities are used as a medium for engagement with all sections of the community (eg Christmas Event, Fenny Poppers) or specific sections of the community (eg Youth Clubs) and partnership working in preparation and delivery of events also promotes engagement
- Town councillors live within 3 miles of the town they serve and/or work in the town and therefore have close ties to the community making them well placed in terms of informed representation

Future Improvements

BFSTC plans to improve its community engagement by committing to the principles set out in this document, by continuing its current programme of engagement activities as shown above and by:

- Identifying and embracing opportunities to work with local community groups, statutory bodies and other partners
- Publicising successful partnership working to encourage new working relationships to be formed between the council and other community groups
- Extending and developing its website and its use of other digital platforms

- Actively seeking the views and opinions of people and groups who are missed out of community engagement activities
- Participating in local networks to share knowledge and experience of community engagement activities
- Planning and evaluating any specific consultation and involvement exercises to assess effectiveness
- Reviewing all community engagement activities on an annual basis and producing an action plan for each calendar year

Evaluation

It is extremely important that the Council measures the success of this policy and its effectiveness in engaging with the community it serves. To review the effectiveness the Council will:

- Consult with residents through perception and satisfaction surveys
- Measure visits to the website and the number of Friends and Followers on social networking sites
- Review and evaluate the comments and complaints received
- Conduct reviews with both Councillors and employees

Responsibility

The implementation of this policy is the responsibility of all Councillors who must actively work to enhance community engagement in the decision making process and with the Town Clerk for overseeing its implementation.

Review

The policy will be reviewed on a four-year cycle but amended as necessary based on good practice and in the light of on-going experiences in engaging with the community. The Communications Plan will be reviewed annually but will also be updated in the light of on-going experiences.