

Community Engagement Strategy 2020-2023

Introduction

The people who make up our communities are fundamental to making Gravesham such a fantastic place to live, work and enjoy.

The council and this Administration is committed to being a listening council and in touch with its residents to ensure we deliver their priorities. To achieve this community engagement needs to be at the heart of what

we do so that we can all work together to deliver effective services and build supportive and cohesive communities.

Our relationship with local residents and those who work and visit our Borough is crucial to all of us here at the council. During these times of unprecedented uncertainty, change and challenges, it is more important than ever to build respect and trust between the council and the people of Gravesham.

This strategy and accompanying action plan will outline how the council will build on the existing strengths of our local communities, facilitate and support opportunities for all to have a voice, and help develop the skills of local communities and organisations that are essential in building the social capital that brings us all together.

Councillor Shane Mochrie-Cox

Cabinet Member for Community & Leisure

Background

For the purposes of this strategy, we consider community engagement as a process that brings people together over a shared connection which could be a place, an interest, or an identity.

There have been many drives over the years to empower residents to be more involved in the decisions that affect their lives and the services they receive, with varying degrees of success. Community engagement actively encourages participation and, as a lower tier local authority, Gravesham Borough Council is in a strong position to bring its local community and partners together to achieve this.

People are our greatest resource and, during these challenging and changing times, there have been tremendous examples of neighbourliness, public spirit and co-operation. By developing a community engagement strategy we have an opportunity to assess and learn from the past, whilst looking ahead to future challenges to strengthen our relationship with local people and help support our corporate objectives.

This strategy is ambitious but realistic and to ensure it remains relevant, will be reviewed annually.

Our Vision

Our vision is that Gravesham Borough Council will be:

A listening and responsive Council that involves our community and makes a difference

Strategic Objectives

This strategy sets out four core objectives as the framework for developing community engagement. These are:

- Being a Listening Council
- Empowering Residents and Communities
- Supporting Community Organisations
- Building Cohesive Communities

Being a Listening Council

The Council is committed to being a listening council reaching out to all our communities. We will develop this priority through the following:

Establishing clear communication to the public on those opportunities where we need input from our communities to shape our priorities and services supporting the Council's Communication Strategy

The Council will act as a platform for collating information and issues for Gravesham residents and signpost to appropriate agencies

Feeding back to the community on the information received from consultations, how that information has been used and the difference made. Where action has not been taken this needs to be clearly communicated.

Providing support for Elected Members and officers in developing effective listening and engagement opportunities to help the council be more responsive to local needs and recognising the key bridging role they hold.

Education, communication, information and advice will be central to the work of this strategy and action plan.

Empowering Residents and Communities.

Supporting and developing individuals and neighbourhoods with the tools and skills to take a more active role in their local area, leading to more empowered residents and communities. The council will support this aim by:

Supporting volunteers and community leaders with relevant training and mentoring opportunities.

Encouraging collaborative working at a very local level supported by Ward Members, officers and relevant service providers to help build ownership, co-operation and pride in the local area

Providing clear opportunities and processes for residents to influence local decision making

Working in partnership with other authorities and agencies to deliver for local communities.

Work closely and listen to thematic, interest and specialist groups and individuals to enhance the Borough's Offer to residents, businesses and visitors especially in the arts, culture, tourism, heritage, sports and leisure sectors.

Supporting Community Organisations

Community organisations play a central role in facilitating and developing community action and building strong social networks. The council will provide support by:

Establishing and supporting a network for local community organisations including a register of all community organisations in Gravesham.

Align financial support for local community organisations to this strategy, formalising the Community Engagement and Events Grants Scheme and also run a Civic Events Protocol which will be administered by the Council

Developing opportunities for community organisations, groups and clubs to engage with the council

Provide dedicated support to those groups and representatives from seldom heard communities and demographics including continued support for Gravesham Youth Council, the 50+ forum and Gravesham Access Group.

Help support community groups be sustainable via ongoing and external funding opportunities.

Building Cohesive Communities

Gravesham is a Borough that is recognised and celebrated for its diverse and cohesive communities. Community engagement is essential in working effectively with diverse communities, neighbourhoods and interest groups. The council is committed to:

Ensuring it has appropriate and inclusive opportunities to facilitate engagement and build trust with its ethnic minority communities and communities of interest. This includes the LGBT+ community, Armed Forces, disability representatives and faith communities.

Develop the council's diverse community events programme

Support educational and awareness raising activities to build better understanding and cohesiveness

Strategic Position and Key Policies

For the purposes of this strategy it is useful to set the strategic position of the Council and links with other key policies which will support delivery of this work.

Corporate Plan

The Corporate Plan 2019 – 2023 sets out the ambitions for the council and the actions being taken to achieve this, working towards the overall vision to ‘deliver a Gravesham to be proud of’. The plan was a result of working with and listening to communities to understand areas of the council work that were of greatest importance to the local community.

There are three objectives – People, Place and Progress. This community commitment sits under the Place objective with a specific commitment to ‘Develop a cohesive and resilient community’.

As a Council, all work delivered links back to the Corporate Plan and can often cut across more than one objective. Whilst the strategy links directly to developing a cohesive and resilient community, it also supports many other objectives including creating stronger neighbourhoods, improving the local environment, improving resident well-being, and enhancing the borough’s cultural offer.

Equalities Duty

The Equalities Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and wider society. As a local authority, the council is required to prepare and publish one or more objectives to show how we will achieve the aims of the general equality duty. The general equality duty requires public authorities, in the exercise of their functions, to have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it.
- Foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it.
- This duty directly impacts and guides our community engagement activity to ensure that our actions assist and address inequalities.

As a council we have recently reviewed and revised our Equalities Objectives. The Equalities Framework for Local Government was used to help identify the new objectives which dedicates one of its five themes to “involving your community” and emphasises the importance of obtaining the views of a wide range of people who live and work in the area with focused efforts made to those who are marginalised and vulnerable. The evolving action plan will link with and support this Community Engagement Strategy.

Communication Strategy

Gravesham Borough Council is committed to delivering a Gravesham to be proud of for residents, businesses and visitors and building a strong and trusted brand. The effectiveness of how the vision is delivered will be determined to a significant extent by the quality of communications and engagement. Cabinet recently considered a corporate Communications Strategy which focusses on internal and external communication, as well

as directly linking to this Community Engagement Strategy through ensuring appropriate engagement and involvement of audiences.

Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy 2019-2023

The council's Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy identifies Prevention and Community Involvement as the primary objective to help stop ASB from happening or escalating and is one of 4 overarching priorities.

Within the action plan there are specific actions where community engagement has a leading role in supporting delivery of the objective:

- Reducing acts of ASB directed against the person

A Creative Gravesham 2020-2025

Our Arts & Cultural Strategy outlines the council's commitments to build on the strong legacy of community events and support creativity and cultural cohesion within the borough.

Community engagement has a significant role in supporting the priority of growing a cultural and creative community and establishing a vibrant and aspirational arts and cultural events programme. In particular:

- Developing a cultural environment that is no longer solely confined by access to buildings and venues
- Creating a volunteer network to support cultural events and the heritage sector
- Ensuring that the diversity that defines the borough is reflected in all our activities

Methods of Engagement

The Council uses a range of engagement methods from traditional questionnaire to events and activities. Our aim is to use the most appropriate method of engagement that is fit for purpose and will develop further in the associated action plan.

This means that we will:

- Use the most appropriate method of engagement, taking into account the purpose of the engagement, the required reach and nature of involvement and complexity of information being provided
- Make sure the methods we use are accessible to everyone who wants to take part
- Identify preferred methods of communication for different activities and groups
- Guide colleagues and partners as to the best methods of engagement and what has worked well with different communities so that we can use methods we know are effective
- Evaluate methods and make changes in response to feedback

Regular reports will take place on the progress of the Strategy and Action Plan to the Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure and via the Community and Leisure Cabinet Committee

SWOT Analysis

The following analysis sets out the current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in achieving our vision and delivering against this strategy. This analysis will be part of the review of the overall strategy and attention will be paid to how best to address some of the weaknesses as part of our efforts to continually develop and improve engagement.

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
A diverse community who are keen to engage	Up to date engagement databases of community organisations, local groups, residents and businesses	Ability to grow a network of contacts for engagement, from community organisations to local residents	Unrealistic expectation of engagement opportunities or outcomes
Officers and Members who recognise and value the importance of true community engagement	Gaps in community leader representation from some groups	Develop representation from underrepresented and seldom heard groups	Funding challenges to support local delivery of activities
Local community organisations who support active engagement and are able to advise on changing community needs and issues	Little capacity or lack of skills amongst some groups to fully engage in opportunities with the Council, e.g., leading specific activities and events	Increase feedback about what the Council has done in response to engagement	Limited officer resource unable to meet wider demand for engagement activities
Local community groups keen to support a diverse programme of events and activities that raise awareness and			

support education and cohesion			
Active parish councils in the rural areas of the borough (19% of the Gravesham population)			

Action Plan

To support the development of this strategy, an action plan has been drafted to set out some of the initial work streams that will be taken forward. The action plan will be kept under review and streams of work will be developed on an ongoing basis to ensure delivery of the overall objectives and to meet changing demands and priorities for the Council and community.

Objective	Action	Expected outcome
Being a Listening Council	Develop and publish a programme of public consultations, including statutory responsibilities	Public, staff and elected members are all informed and able to plan ahead leading to improved responses
Being a Listening Council	Develop and publish a protocol for how the council collates, responds and uses community feedback and information	Improved accountability of the council to help build trust
Being a Listening Council	Promote how to contact the council and your local councillor	Improved awareness and contacts with the council and Elected Members
Being a Listening Council	Build on and support links with the six Parish Councils in the borough recognising the crucial engagement role they play for their communities ensuring they are an integral part of the	Rural residents and parish councillors are supported by the borough council and able to share examples of good practice

	council's community engagement strategy	
Being a Listening Council	Align the strategy to complement and support the Council's Communication Strategy	Consistency in messaging and ensuring communication and education are at the core of the strategy
Empowering Residents and Communities	Implementing and developing the Street Champion Scheme network of litter picking volunteers.	Local residents take a more active role in their area
Empowering Residents and Communities	Using the Community Cohesion Atlas for Gravesham and Community Safety intelligence identify a priority street/ neighbourhood for targeted action	Increase in pride and ownership of the local area
Empowering Residents and Communities	Developing tools and processes for the public to engage with the council building on recent successes of using virtual tools during the pandemic but also recognising the digital divide	Increased engagement with a broader representation of the community
Empowering Residents and Communities	Developing links and mechanisms with local services, organisations and agencies to support and address local issues	Increased awareness of and influence in local services.
Supporting Community Organisations	Develop an On-line community organisation and representative database. When seeking consent to be part of the database, information will be collected that will include preferred method of engagement and areas of expertise.	Increased contacts with community organisations. Staff more confident to make appropriate referrals

Supporting Community Organisations	Develop Community Organisation Network to share information, opportunities and issues.	More supported and empowered community organisations
Supporting Community Organisations	Identify and develop support for the sector to include funding opportunities, training, collaborative working	Increase capacity and viability of the sector
Building Cohesive Communities	Review current links with BAME Community representatives and communities of interest and identify any gaps that need focus	Improved contacts with Gravesham's excluded communities
Building Cohesive Communities	Develop the council's calendar of diverse community events providing support to community leaders and linking with relevant community organisations.	Improved sense of pride and belonging in Gravesham, improved understanding and tolerance

Glossary of Terms

Term or phrase	Description
BAME	The acronym stands for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and is used in the UK to describe non-white people.
Collaboration	The process of two or more people or organisations working together to achieve a common goal or complete a task
Communities of Interest	A group of people who have shared identity, experiences, characteristics or common interests. For example Afro-Caribbean community, Armed Forces, homeless community.

Community Cohesion	A community where people feel that they belong and are comfortable mixing with people from different backgrounds. The process of developing trust and building a shared understanding and common values
Community Empowerment	The process of enabling communities to increase control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives.
Community Engagement	The process of working collaboratively as a community with a shared interest such as where they live, to address issues affecting the wellbeing of these people.
Diversity	Acknowledging and recognising the differences between people and groups of people and placing a positive value on those differences. It applies to everyone
Seldom heard	Ensuring attempts to engage are inclusive and that effort and focus is prioritised to build relationships with groups outside of the “usual suspects”, developing the skills to effectively involve and listen.
Social Capital	The value placed on the network of relationships among people or groups that help society to function.
Under represented groups	Those groups who are under represented in consultations, as service users etc. according to the local community profile.