

Thame Town Council

Community Engagement Strategy

1. Purpose

1.1 Community Engagement is 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, its priorities and how well it is performing.

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

1.3 The objectives of this strategy are to:

- Encourage effective local community engagement.
- Ensure there is a clear understanding by both Members and staff of the need to engage with the community about decisions which affect them.
- Enable the information gathered through the engagement process to have an impact on decision making and the way in which services are delivered.
- Identify how the Council can enhance its profile by improving engagement with the wider community.

2. Principles

2.1 The Localism Bill places considerable onus on increased involvement and therefore the initial guiding principles are:

- i) The Council cannot force any individual or group to become involved but it can and will make it easier and more appealing to do so.
- ii) It will always be clear before the start of any participation or consultation event; to what extent it will inform a decision.
- iii) 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.
- iv) All involvement will be time bound and the aggregated results published openly.
- v) Not every decision will require community involvement.

2.2 The process should encourage people to take the wider view and to ensure those not able to attend any consultation events to have their views expressed by other means. Consultation events are not intended as an opportunity for individuals with a particular interest to lobby decision makers.

- 2.3** Consultation will be targeted at relevant groups and if it calls for wider public involvement it will be advertised locally allowing people time to engage with the process.
- 2.4** Questions will be specific and non leading, they may be open (e.g. where do you think the swings should be sited?) but not open ended (e.g. what do you think should be done?).
- 2.5** Care will be taken to ensure that no one voice is given greater weight than any other.

3. Commitment

3.1 The Council currently facilitates community engagement in the following ways:

- Public participation at the beginning of each Council and Committee meeting.
- The publishing of agendas, minutes and supporting documents for all Council meetings on the website and displaying agendas on various notice boards.
- Active involvement in the Annual Town Meeting with public question time.
- The annual External Audit provides the opportunity for questions about the latest Statement of Accounts and Balance Sheet.
- Sending press releases to all local media outlets and publishing news stories on the website.
- Having a “Model Publication Scheme”, committing the Council to producing and publishing the method by which specific information is made available.
- Having an Information Centre in the Town Hall open 5 days a week.
- Facilitating the Thame Alliance Group (TAG) which considers the needs of more vulnerable or isolated groups in Thame.
- Facilitating the Business Forum.
- Facilitating 21st Century Thame.
- Facilitating Thame4Business.

3.2 The Council is committed to improving community engagement by:

- Continuing all the above activities and services into the future.
- Developing and embracing opportunities to harness the opinions of people and groups from all sectors of the community of Thame.
- Extending and developing the range of electronic communication including a presence on social networking media such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.
- Ensuring that any information published is clear, concise and widely available.
- Evaluating consultation exercises to ensure continues improvement and effectiveness in how the Council operates.
- Publicising the positive results that are achieved from working in partnership with groups to encourage further partnerships.

4. Evaluation

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

- Consult with residents through perception and satisfaction surveys.
- Measure the “hits” on the website and the number of “Friends and Followers” on social networking sites when they are implemented.
- Review and evaluate the comments and complaints received.
- Conduct reviews with both councillors and staff.

5. Responsibility

5.1 The success of this Strategy is with all councillors, who must actively work to enhance community engagement in the decision making process and with the Town Clerk for overseeing its implementation.

6. Review

6.1 This Strategy will be reviewed on a four-year cycle but amended as necessary based on good practice or in light of on-going experiences in engaging with the community.