

Sevenoaks Town Council's Community Engagement Strategy: Approved by Sevenoaks Town Council at its Finance & General Purposes Committee 15.01.2024.



Sevenoaks TOWN Council

Community Engagement Strategy

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1. Introduction

Welcome to Sevenoaks Town Council's Community Engagement Strategy.

Sevenoaks is situated in the County of Kent in the South of England with a population of 18,500.

It is an ancient market town that grew up where historic roads from North Kent and London crossed the greensand ridge, overlooking the Kentish Weald surrounded by Green Belt

Due to its proximity to London, a significant number of people commute to London to work. However, Sevenoaks has a very active community ethos and was voted the 'happiest' town in Britain in 2007.

A large part of Sevenoaks Town Centre is pedestrianised, with lots of individual specialist shops. There is a vibrant café culture and the Stag Community Arts Centre with its busy schedule of events in both the theatre and cinema boosts the night-time economy.

It is believed that the original seven oaks from which the town derived its name stood near the church of the southern side of the town. Indeed, the motto for Sevenoaks is 'Floreat Septem Quercus' [may the Seven Oaks Flourish].

This also forms part of the Sevenoaks Town Council crest.

Sevenoaks made the world headlines in 1987 when six of the seven oaks which had been planted in 1902 to celebrate the coronation of King Edward VII were blown over in the 'hurricane' in October of that year.

Sevenoaks Town Council has 16 voluntary Town Councillors representing the following electoral wards:-

Ward	Councillor	Political Party
Eastern Ward	Councillor Libby Ancrum	Liberal Democrat
	Councillor Tony Clayton	Liberal Democrat
	Councillor Sally Layne	Liberal Democrat
Kippington Ward	Councillor Catherine Daniell	Liberal Democrat
	Councillor Chloe Gustard	Liberal Democrat
	Councillor Nicholas Varley	Liberal Democrat
Northern Ward	Councillor Claire Shea	Liberal Democrat
	Councillor Dr Merylyn Canet	Liberal Democrat
	Councillor Lionell O'Hara	Liberal Democrat
St Johns Ward	Councillor Sue Camp	Liberal Democrat
	Councillor Peter Dixon	Liberal Democrat
	Councillor David Skinner OBE	Liberal Democrat
Town Ward	Councillor Victoria Granville	Liberal Democrat
	Councillor Lise Michaelides	Liberal Democrat
	Councillor Gareth Willis	Liberal Democrat

Wilderness Ward	Councillor Nigel Wightman	Liberal Democrat
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This strategy sets out what community engagement is, why we do it and the aims and actions which support it.

This strategy is about building on the good practice which already exists in the Town and making it better. It also acknowledges the genuine desire of all partners within our community to work more closely together for the benefit of local residents. Crucially, it seeks to ensure that the many 'communities' in Sevenoaks have a voice in the debate around improving the delivery of local services and thus having a positive impact on life and work in the Town.

2. What is Community Engagement?

Community Engagement is a term covering many different activities carried out with people who make up our communities. It is about making sure that people can participate and engage in lots of different ways to make Sevenoaks a better place. Community engagement can happen in many ways from Town Meetings, survey polls, questionnaires, Mayor's and Councillors surgeries, big events, through to the arts, festivals and much more.

Community engagement can also take place at a number of different levels from low involvement activity to high involvement activity. For example, this can range from providing information to people, to consultation by asking for feedback on a particular service or policy, to participation when decision making is shared and through to empowerment which gives people ownership of the decisions and support to carry out their own activities.

3. The aim of the Community Engagement Strategy

The strategy is about trying to change the way Sevenoaks Town Council and its partners work. It is about developing an approach to our work which puts communities and people truly at the centre of our work. It is about doing everything we can to tailor our services as closely as possible to the needs and wants of people, to recognise that different people have different needs and wants, and to help those people make their own choices and exercise their own control over events.

The aim of the Community Engagement Strategy is therefore to continuously review engagement methods with the public:-

- So that we have a better understanding of their needs and views; and
- Help us better meet people's needs.
- Improve Sevenoaks Town Council's efficiency and effectiveness; and
- Empower people and communities to influence the things that affect their daily lives.

- Explaining tiers of local government and relevant responsibilities

4. What is a Community?

Communities can be:

Communities of Place – people within a defined geographical area e.g., the parish of Sevenoaks or the town wards of Bradbourne Lakes, Greatness, or Kippington.

Communities of Interest – People who share a particular experience or characteristic, such as young people, allotment holders, sports organisations, businesses, faith groups, older people, disabled people, ethnic groups or as an example.

Communities may define themselves and definitions do change, and people often belong to more than one community and communities themselves are often very diverse. The key point is that we always endeavour to engage with all residents.

5. Why Do We Engage?

Community Engagement gives individuals, communities and partners a range of very important benefits:

- Developing a better understanding of and relationship with communities through genuine dialogue.
- Involving residents in public services and making sure their knowledge, experience and priorities shape those services, so they are more responsive to need.
- Encouraging more voluntary and community groups to become involved in planning and delivering local services.
- Helping people to establish an improved sense of neighbourhood and more cohesive communities.
- Engaging more people in local democracy.

6. Our Partners:

There are different partners involved in working together on community engagement:

- All residents of Sevenoaks
- Councillors as elected representatives of their communities
- Voluntary and community groups both individually and through local organisations
- Private sector organisations, local businesses and social enterprises
- Public service providers

The approach to community engagement in Sevenoaks is founded upon the principle that each agency, public, private, or voluntary is responsible for its own community engagement activity.

7. Our Principles which support Engagement:

Through this strategy and the engagement work we are all involved in across the town, we aim to:

- Have clear objectives for engagement and to communicate clearly and openly about decisions and actions and the reasons for them.
- Seek to reach those communities and individuals not yet engaged.
- Share information and expertise.
- Engage in innovative and creative ways using social media.
- Recognise and value existing channels and work to make these more responsive and effective.
- Engage using a range of flexible methods to avoid relying on one source or route.
- Communicating in clear and inclusive language.

8. Our Commitments:

Through this strategy we are committed to:

- Using the most appropriate level of involvement and participation for each activity.
- Building on the existing skills of local people and communities so they are empowered to engage in decision making.
- Developing the voluntary and community sector to play a key role in helping in delivering services.
- Developing a culture where other peoples' views are valued and listened to and are part of the decision-making process and help build cohesion in Sevenoaks.

9. How we will do it:

To help us achieve effective community engagement we will make use of:

- Noticeboards, the Town Crier newsletter, the website, public meetings, the Town Forum, press releases, distribution of information via resident associations and recognised community groups, digital information screens, infopods, social media and public events.

The Council's approach must be one that seeks to communicate with everyone with an interest in a particular issue and will use a variety of different communication techniques to try to be as effective as possible. It will choose the techniques on the basis of the particular community or people being targeted and will try to make the communications as focused and specific as possible. It will try to work as closely as possible with partner organisations in engaging with the community.

Holding topic-based meetings e.g., Sports Strategy, Neighbourhood Development Plan, Town Team and Youth Council. Also working with other statutory bodies.

10. How will we measure success?

- Through attendance at meetings of the Council, Committees, Annual Town Meeting, public meetings, and events.

- Responses received to questionnaires, surveys, and polls.
- Statistics from the website and other forms of social media.
- The Town Council's annual report will include a section on community engagement and a 'dashboard' to compare progress each year.

11. Consideration of Hard and Soft Information

Some communication approaches produce 'hard' factual information, which can then be subject to mathematical analysis. Others tend only to produce 'soft' information – impressions, views, opinions, anecdotes, etc. – words rather than numbers.

Soft data is often regarded as less reliable than hard data, and it can often be hard to produce simple results from it. However, soft data still has important uses – particularly in describing qualitative things, or in explaining a situation. The Council needs to make use of both types of information in communicating with its communities.

Care has to be taken, however, about how representative any particular piece of information is – an individual may hold impassioned views on a particular service, but they may simply be the views of that one individual; the rest of the community may have a diametrically opposed view. This is not to say that the person's views are invalid merely that they have to be used with care and in recognition of the context in which they are given.

12. Financial Constraints

Communication inevitable has a cost attached to it, and the strategy should seek to increase community engagement only where a cost versus benefit calculation has been made. Within this constraint, there are other methods which can be used to at a minimal cost by changing the way we communicate with our residents and influencing the attitudes of staff to this with more emphasis on 'serving' and less on 'governing'. The differences between a dissatisfied resident and a satisfied one can be as simple as the words used in a letter, an email, or on the telephone. If people receive an excessively arbitrary or bureaucratic letter from an officer of member, they are much more likely to become upset. The same message conveyed in simple and reasonable terms is more likely to help achieve our goal.

Would you like further information on how to become involved?

For more information on this strategy, or to find out more about becoming involved in putting it into action, contact:

The Town Clerk, email townclerk@sevenoakstown.gov.uk

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