

**'A Listening Council' - A Community
Engagement Strategy for
Gravesham
2020-2023**



Introduction by Councillor Shane Mochrie-Cox,
Cabinet Member for Community & Leisure

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.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shane Mochrie-Cox'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Councillor Shane Mochrie-Cox

Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure

Background

Community engagement can mean many things. It is probably most helpful to consider it 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 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 and in touch with its residents. 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.
- 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.
- The Council can act as a conduit for issues raised by the people and, if not in the gift of the Council to deal with, act as a conduit for the issues and signpost these to appropriate agencies
- Education, communication, information and advice will be the foundation and feature across 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.
- Reviewing its financial support for local community organisations and creating and 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
- Work will be done to ensure that demographic and marginalised sections of the community are heard especially listening to older residents, young people and faith groups. This will include supporting the work of the groups such as the Gravesham Youth Council and the 50+ Forum and Age UK, 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 BAME communities and communities of interest
- 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.

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 as a whole.

Strengths	Weaknesses
A diverse community who are keen to engage	Up to date engagement databases of community organisations, local groups, residents and businesses
Officers and Members who recognise and value the importance of true community engagement	Gaps in community leader representation from some groups
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
Local community groups keen to support a diverse programme of events and activities that raise awareness and support education and cohesion	
Opportunities	Threats
Ability to grow a network of contacts for engagement, from community organisations to local residents	Unrealistic expectation of engagement opportunities or outcomes
Develop representation from under-represented groups	Funding challenges to support local delivery of activities
Increase feedback about what the Council has done in response to engagement	Limited officer resource unable to meet wider demand for engagement activities

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.

Action Plan

	Action	Expected outcomes
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
	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
	Promote how to contact the council and your local councillor	Improved awareness and contacts with the council and Elected Members
Empowering Residents and Communities		
	Implementing and developing the Street Champion Scheme.	Local residents take a more active role in their area
	Using the Community Cohesion Atlas for Gravesham and Community Safety intelligence identify a priority street/ neighbourhood plan for targeted action	Increase in pride and ownership of the local area
	Developing tools and processes for the public to engage with the council with a particular focus on virtual to allow for social distancing.	Increased engagement with a broader representation of the community
Supporting Community Organisations		
	On-line community organisation database. Develop, publish and keep updated.	Increased contacts with community organisations. Staff more confident to make appropriate referrals
	Develop Community Organisation Network	More supported and empowered 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
	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