

Kings Hill Parish Council Community Engagement Policy

Readopted by Council: 19 September 2024
Planned Review Date: May 2025

Introduction

Kings Hill Parish Council recognises the importance of local people, community groups and businesses having a voice in contributing to the debate and decisions on issues being determined by the Parish Council and on wider issues within Kings Hill.

Community engagement is at the heart of our Strategic Plan 2023 – 2027. Our Vision for Kings Hill is a community where people of all ages are proud to live, work and participate in a diverse but engaged community, with shared values and common goals. One of our Strategic Goals is a Community with Pride with the objective of a single, engaged, and empowered Kings Hill Community and for the Parish Council to provide a voice for Kings Hill. A further aim is to provide excellent communications and transparency. This Policy is intended to support that goal and highlight our commitment.

This document forms the Parish Council's first Community Engagement Policy. It sets out:-

- The Role of community engagement and its importance.
- How Kings Hill Parish Council engages with the wider community and identifies the needs and aspirations of the community.
- How the Parish Council can improve community engagement.

The objectives of the policy are to:

- Encourage effective local community engagement.
- Ensure that embedded throughout the Council, there is a clear understanding of the need to engage with communities about decisions that affect them.
- Enable aspirations/ comments/suggestions obtained from community engagement to have an impact on decision-making and the way decisions are being made and services are being delivered.
- Identify how the Council can enhance its profile by improving engagement with the wider community (with specific reference to the harder-to-reach groups in our society).

Community Engagement – an Overview

Community engagement is concerned with giving local people a voice and involving them in decisions which affect them and their community. This may include individuals, voluntary and community organisations, as well as other public sector bodies.

It provides an opportunity for local people to talk to the Parish Council about their aspirations and/or needs in their community and neighbourhood. It allows the Council to consult with and inform people about what services it provides, how it prioritises, how policies are determined and how well it is performing.

The term stakeholder refers to a wide range of people and groups (these might include, residents, visitors, businesses, voluntary organisations, public service organisations and lobby groups), all of which have an interest in the Council's services and projects and other issues in Kings Hill.

Hard to Reach groups refer to those likely to experience social exclusion and are sometimes perceived as being disempowered. Some examples include young people, elderly people, physical disability, language barriers, financial constraints, cultural differences or social

expectations. The Parish Council will put effort into seeking their views, but it also recognises that sometimes they may have excluded themselves through personal choice.

The key aspects of community engagement include: -

- Development of a network of relationships between the Council, individuals, voluntary and community groups.
- Clear and open communication to ensure that information is made accessible to all groups.
- Listening and understanding to a range of people to identify aspirations, needs and problems of local people and groups.

Effective and meaningful community engagement can provide several benefits: -

- The problems and needs of local people are identified so that appropriate new or improved facilities/services can be provided.
- Those participating feel empowered by being involved in decision-making in their local community.
- This may result in enhanced leadership and greater interest in elections or standing for Council and in volunteering within the community.

Kings Hill Parish Council and Community Engagement

The Parish Council will facilitate community engagement in the following ways: -

- Ensuring information on what decisions are being considered and how residents can influence or contribute to the discussions are available in good time. Methods used to ensure engagement will be - through the Parish Council website, noticeboard, the Quarterly newsletter View from the Hill, the Parish Council's Facebook, posters, consultations, reports, events and word of mouth.
- All meetings of the Parish Council and its committees are open to the public and press and there is a period set aside for public participation. Residents can access agendas for meetings via the Parish Council website, and noticeboard or they can be collected from the Parish Council office, public agendas are also made available at the meetings of the Council and its committees. The Parish Council website, noticeboard, and agendas explain the procedure for residents wishing to speak at meetings. Facilities also exist where residents can, where appropriate or necessary, make written reports, present petitions or have a case presented on their behalf to Councillors.
- Planning applications are considered at Planning and Transport Committee meetings which are held monthly. The opportunities for people to speak apply equally to these agenda items. Equal opportunity is given to applicants/supporters, objectors and local community groups.
- The Parish Clerk is the principal advisor to the Council and other staff also advise on their areas of expertise. They must however be politically neutral and ensure that residents can be fully involved, have their views considered and be confident that they are receiving unbiased information and support from Council Officers.
- Details of how to contact the Parish Clerk will be displayed on the Council noticeboard, Council website and Facebook. Details of how to contact Councillors will be displayed on the noticeboard and the Parish Council website.
- The Parish Council will produce a list of annual Council and committee dates to include the start times of the meetings.
- The Parish Council will be open and accountable in its dealing with residents and the community. It will make information on its policies and procedures freely available.
- The Parish Council will be receptive to requests from residents or communities and will attempt to be flexible to ensure their opinions are known not only to the Parish Council but also to other organisations. This may be by including an item for discussion on an agenda or allowing a local group to put their opinions into an official report undertaken by the Parish Council.

- The Parish Council will operate a “gateway” service from its office to ensure local people and communities are referred to the correct organisation, Officer, Borough, or Parish Councillor where the Parish Council cannot resolve their issue directly.
- Parish Councillors will continue to represent the Council on various outside bodies, to ensure that they are kept informed of the communities’ needs.

Communication

Kings Hill Parish Council is committed to improving community engagement by: -

- Continuing all the above activities and services into the future and improving relationships with community groups, including developing measures to harness the views and opinions of people and groups who often miss out on community engagement activities.
- Ensuring that the principles and standards of its main Communications Policy (which is also available on the website, are applied to its community engagement.
- Being proactive and willing to consider any reasonable opportunities that support its purpose of making information available and increasing contributions from the community, especially those that are difficult to reach.
- When dealing with controversial issues that affect a particular community then consideration will be given to holding a public meeting.
- Consultations and surveys are to be considered when necessary and appropriate and results will be made available.
- Continuing to work in partnership to produce and review community-led policies. It will also ensure that priorities from such policies are built into its own Business Plan.
- Identifying and embracing opportunities to work with other local community groups when the need arises.
- Publicising the positive results that have been achieved from working relationships between the Council and other community groups; to encourage new relationships/partnerships to be formed and to raise community spirit.
- Promoting elections and the importance of the democratic process and the value of being a Councillor.
- Promoting the value to Kings Hill of volunteering.
- Reviewing its Community Engagement Strategy on regular basis to ensure that it remains relevant.

Freedom of Information

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, this document will be posted on the Council website and copies will be available from the Parish Council office.

Outcomes

The outcomes which we are striving for and against which the success of this policy will be measured are: -

- Improved communication through the establishment of new channels of engagement.
- More residents understand the role of Councillors, feeling they can become involved and thereby get the best effect.
- Improved engagement with local communities, with more people feeling that they are involved in decision-making and a higher percentage of people involved in volunteering.
- Improved satisfaction with services provided by the Council.