

**Sutton Coldfield Parish Council
Interim Parish Council Meeting
15th March 2016**

Agenda Item 10

Involving the Public in the Work of Sutton Coldfield Town Council

This paper discusses options for engaging the public in the work of the Parish/ Town Council and seeks approval for an overall approach as the council comes into being.

1. The quality of our communication with the community will have a significant bearing on how successful Sutton Coldfield Town/Parish Council is seen to be. Members of the public will form an opinion of the Council whether or not we communicate well with them. However by actively engaging and being transparent about everything we do we not only apply best practice but also take the opportunity to set the agenda and ensure that our dialogue with the public is meaningful. The wheels of Local Government do grind slowly and people will often expect results in shorter timeframes than we are able to deliver. By continuously making use of a range of communications approaches we can ensure that we constantly update our understanding of community needs, reassure the public that things are happening and address issues before they gain traction.
2. Outlined below is a menu of approaches which the Council may consider implementing over the longer term. There are also some immediate recommendations for members to consider.

Council Meetings

3. Council meetings are primarily for Councillors to make decisions about matters within the Council's remit. Members of the public, and the press, have a right to be present to witness proceedings and are now allowed to record or film the meeting if they wish. There is however no statutory right for members of the public to speak at a council meeting. It is nonetheless good practice to allow some time for members of the community to ask questions and make short statements in respect of items that are on the agenda and our recommended standing orders provide for this to occur. Note that unless good notice is given of a question to be raised there is no obligation on the council to respond to a question at the meeting and the chairman can instead indicate that a written or verbal answer will be provided outside the meeting or brought back to a subsequent meeting for discussion. It is also the case that members of the public do not need to save up their questions for a Council meeting. In the ordinary course of events they can also email the clerk and if the question relates to existing Council policy the Clerk can respond without referring the matter to Council.

It is recommended that the council adopts the practise of having a short Public Question Time in relation to items on the agenda at all council meetings.

Annual Meeting of Electors (Town Meeting)

4. Town and Parish Councils have a statutory obligation to hold a meeting for electors each year between 1st March and 1st June. Typically at these meetings the council, through the Chairman, will give a verbal report to the community on Council achievements and activities that have taken place throughout the year. It is also an opportunity to take soundings on current Council Policy Initiatives, make awards and celebrate aspects of life in the Town.

Annual Report

5. In addition to the verbal report at the Annual Meeting of Electors it is considered good practice for the Council to produce a written annual report giving financial and other information about the Councils past year activities often enhanced with photos of key events or achievements. This can be distributed in a number of formats, via the Council website, and by providing hard copies in Libraries and /or community centres. There will naturally be costs attached to creating and distributing an annual report and these would need to be assessed. A traditional approach of distributing reports door to door for example would probably not be cost effective.

Parish/ Town Newsletter

6. The Council may wish, once it is fully in place to provide a quarterly newsletter about council activities. Such newsletters need to be focussed and avoid competing with the established press but they can be a good way to focus attention on the specific activities of the Council all in one place. Once again this can be provided both through the website and by providing copies at local centres.

It is recommended that the Council considers providing an annual report each year after the financial year end and publishing newsletters on a two to four times a year basis.

Interactive Notice Board

7. The Council will have a statutory duty to publish information and public notices about Council meetings and activities and traditionally this is done through a Council Notice board. As a progressive and innovative Council Sutton Coldfield Parish/Town Council may wish to pursue the idea of having an interactive notice board at or close to its Offices. An interactive board is a touch screen, linked to the Town Council's Server, which members of the public can use to find a wide range of community information. It can be linked to the Town Council's Website and also provide information from other public bodies such as the City Council and the NHS Trust. It may also provide a vehicle for local businesses who might be persuaded to sponsor and pay for the service in exchange for providing appropriate and tasteful advertising on the board.

News Releases

8. The local press needs a constant supply of editorial and will publish newsworthy articles based on news releases from Councils. A well timed news release on a controversial issue can sometimes provide information and diffuse the controversy where a failure to communicate could lead to speculation and misinformation. In order to ensure a consistent quality and targeting of News releases it is necessary to establish an approvals process and the most appropriate model within the Town and Parish Council delegation rules might be The Town Clerk working with the Chairman plus two other Councillors who are accessible during the day.

It is recommended that the Council provides regular news releases on relevant topics and that these are drafted by the Parish/Town Clerk in the first instance and then approved by the Chairman and two other Councillors

9. Councillor Surgeries

Regular Councillor surgeries are a good way for Councillors to keep in touch with their constituents and also to provide a personal element to the Councils communications. The programme of surgeries can be informal, where individual councillors make themselves available at specific times (often for an hour or two on one Saturday morning a month) in local centres or the council might consider a more formal rolling programme of surgeries, the timetable for which is published on the website.

10. **It is recommended** that the Council considers the provision of regular Councillor surgeries in local centres to interact directly with the community.

Community Surveys

11. Community surveys are an excellent way of gauging opinion on proposed policy initiatives and also of giving members of the public a feel for what plans the council might have. Using online methods they can also be conducted at low cost and the results can be analysed quickly and cheaply. It is important to avoid the risk of consultation fatigue by overuse of surveys but research has shown that an occasional targeted survey significantly increases the feelings of involvement among the community. Good subjects for community surveys are as the Council is defining its long term priorities and strategies or when a significant or potentially controversial programme is being contemplated.

Summary

12. By adopting a range of communication techniques the Council can ensure that it maintains a ready understanding of the communities wants and needs. It will also help to ensure that the community has a range of mechanisms by which it can gain good appreciation of the Council and what it is trying to achieve and that no single communication approach comes to dominate the councils business.
13. **It is recommended** that the Council approves this overall approach to communicating with the public in the first instance