

# Review of Town and Parish Engagement

<b>Committee considering report:</b>	Executive
<b>Date of Committee:</b>	9 June 2022
<b>Portfolio Member:</b>	Councillor Graham Bridgman
<b>Date Head of Service agreed report:</b> <i>(for Corporate Board)</i>	15 February 2022
<b>Date Portfolio Member agreed report:</b>	22 February 2022
<b>Report Author:</b>	Sam Shepherd, Programme Manager, Local Communities
<b>Forward Plan Ref:</b>	EX4214

## 1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to summarise work carried out to understand and address improvements in the engagement with town and parish councils. The report proposes a resulting 'Improvement Plan' (in Appendix A).

## 2 Recommendation

- 2.1 It is **RECOMMENDED** that the Improvement Plan in Appendix A be agreed.

## 3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
<b>Financial:</b>	It is anticipated that the Improvement Plan in Appendix A will be delivered by the Teams with actions across the Council, within existing resources. Should additional resources or capacity be required to enact the changes identified; funding would be applied for as transformation. Should the transformation in town and parish engagement reveal a long-term pressure on our business-as-usual, this pressure would be identified through the budget-setting process.
<b>Human Resource:</b>	It is anticipated that the Improvement Plan in Appendix A will be delivered by the Teams with actions across the Council, within existing resources.
<b>Legal:</b>	There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

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<b>Risk Management:</b>	The key risk arising from this report is the resource and capacity to deliver the Improvement Plan related to demands on both WBC and town and parish councils. This can be impacted by a number of factors (including the response to the Ukraine war, rise in the cost of living and local resources).			
<b>Property:</b>	There are no direct property implications for the Council arising from this report or its proposals. Where individual town or parish work relates to devolution of assets, the property implications are considered on a case-by-case basis.			
<b>Policy:</b>	There are no national policies which relate to this report or its proposals.			
	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Commentary</b>
<b>Equalities Impact:</b>	X			
<b>A</b> Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?	X			The proposals outlined in this report will have a positive impact on inequalities, as it seeks to drive greater inclusion across communities.
<b>B</b> Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?	X			The proposals outlined in this report will have a positive impact on inequalities, as it seeks to drive greater inclusion across communities.
<b>Environmental Impact:</b>		X		There are no direct environmental implications for the Council arising from this report or its proposals.
<b>Health Impact:</b>	X			The proposals outlined in this report will help improve engagement with our communities, which in turn helps deliver the Berkshire West Health and Wellbeing Strategy which seeks to deliver on all aspects of improved health and wellbeing.

<b>ICT Impact:</b>		X		There are no IT implications for the Council arising from this report or its proposals.
<b>Digital Services Impact:</b>		X		There are no direct digital implications for the Council arising from this report or its proposals.
<b>Council Strategy Priorities:</b>	X			<p>The proposals in this report will help to improve the following Council strategy priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure sustainable services through innovation and partnerships</li> <li>• Support everyone to reach their potential</li> </ul> <p>The proposals outlined in this report directly deliver an action in the Council's Communications and Engagement Strategy 2020-2023.</p>
<b>Core Business:</b>	X			The proposals outlined in this report will support stronger relationships between the Council and our town and parish councils. This will help the Council deliver services in partnership where appropriate.
<b>Data Impact:</b>			X	There are no data or data protection implications for the Council arising from this report or its proposals.
<b>Consultation and Engagement:</b>	This report has been shaped by the views of town and parish councils. The Improvement Plan in Appendix A has been co-produced with our town and parish colleagues. It is estimated that around 75% of town and parish councils have fed in views to this work.			

## 4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 In recognition of the valuable contribution that town and parish councils make, West Berkshire Council committed to reviewing and improving engagement with local towns and parishes. This work supports delivery of the Council's Communications and Engagement Strategy 2020-2023. It is underpinned by a commitment to working alongside our communities.
- 4.2 To begin a review of engagement with towns and parishes, we worked with representatives of parish and town councils to design a survey to understand the current situation. Through this survey and alongside workshop-style 'community conversations' conducted in the summer 2021, we asked what is working well and what we need to do differently to better support our local councils.

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- 4.3 During November and December 2021, we worked with an internal Officer Group and then held four workshops with officers and town and parish colleagues to build on the feedback gathered throughout the summer. During the workshops, we co-designed improvement plans which focused on communications, engagement, working together and on specific services.
- 4.4 This report sets out the approach we have taken and then describes the issues which were identified. Appendix A presents co-designed improvement plans for agreement.

## 5 Supporting Information

### Background

- 5.1 Community life and social connections are all factors that make a vital contribution to people's health and wellbeing. These aspects of community build a sense of resilience and can help buffer against disease and reduce inequalities; this is often referred to as social capital<sup>1</sup>.
- 5.2 As part of West Berkshire Council's Communications and Engagement Strategy, we have committed to working in a way that builds social capital through a programme known as "Engaging and Enabling our Local Communities" (EELC). This approach builds on existing strengths to support community life, social connections and the development of locally-determined solutions to local challenges.
- 5.3 As partners, town and parish councils play an essential role in shaping community life in West Berkshire. We therefore want to make sure that we work alongside town and parish councils to co-design improvements for the future.
- 5.4 To initiate a review of our town and parish engagement, we carried out a survey and workshop-style 'community conversations' throughout the summer 2021. During this time we heard from a total of 56 representatives covering 45 different town and parish councils. This means that we reached 75% of town and parish councils through this engagement exercise; submitted by Chairs, Clerks or Parish Councillors.

### Town and parish views

- 5.5 Having engaged the views of 75% of town and parish councils through this exercise; there is a sense of a robust understanding of the views of colleagues, which are summarised below.

#### *Relationship with West Berkshire Council*

- 5.6 With regards to how town and parish councils feel about their relationship with West Berkshire Council, most (68%) reported that their relationship with the Council was excellent or good. A further 28% said they had a fair relationship. Only 5% said they felt their council had a poor relationship with West Berkshire Council and none reported a very poor relationship.
- 5.7 The positives cited about relationships between town and parish councils and West Berkshire were that it was a good relationship with visible leaders and responsive officers. Key words to describe the relationship were positive, collaborative and

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<sup>1</sup> What Makes Us Healthy (2012) <http://www.assetbasedconsulting.co.uk/uploads/publications/WMUH.pdf>

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constructive. Areas for improvement were that there were differing perspectives and a lack of understanding of the role of town and parish councils. Frustrating and inefficient were also terms used to describe the relationship.

### *Communication*

- 5.8 With regards to communication; the majority of town and parishes said they felt either very or extremely informed (60% in total), with a further 37% reporting they felt somewhat informed. Just over 2.6% felt they were not so informed but no respondents indicated they did not feel at all informed. Respondents identified a clear preference to receive information from West Berkshire Council via e-newsletters, and then via the Council's website. More tailored means of receiving information, via forums and network meetings were also popular. In terms of improvements in communications, topics town and parish respondents said they would find useful in future communications, the top three preferences were on a) changes in legislation b) funding opportunities c) projects in the district.
- 5.9 In the community conversations, there was a strong appreciation regarding the pandemic communications and visibility of the Leader and Chief Executive. Regular updates were really helpful and good summaries were very important. There was a request to use that model going forward and to work together on shared campaigns.

### *Customer service experience*

- 5.10 When we asked town and parish colleagues about their most recent contact with West Berkshire Council, respondents reported most frequent contact with the Council over planning (53%), followed by roads (45%), countryside (35%), grounds maintenance (32%) and waste collection/recycling (20%). In terms of how easy these departments were to contact, how satisfied town and parishes were with the timeliness of responses, how satisfied they were with a resolution and overall helpfulness, the majority of respondents reported positive experiences. However, there were significant numbers of respondents that reported lower levels of satisfaction with planning and roads when contacting the Council.

### *Areas for improvement*

- 5.11 70% of respondents said that there were things West Berkshire Council could do to improve things when communicating town and parish councils. Broadly there were two key themes; engagement and collaboration, and communications. Colleagues wanted increased and proactive engagement at an operational and a strategic level. They would like regular updates, feedback and collaboration on projects. Suggestions were given which included a directory of contacts, a sharing of resources and improved links through workshops and nominated officers. With regards to communications it was felt a summary of and more targeted, regular communications would be helpful.
- 5.12 With regards to the programme known as 'devolution', the majority (78%) of town and parish councils were somewhat informed or very informed are somewhat informed, with only 22% not so informed; however this still represents an opportunity for raising awareness for those in this latter group.
- 5.13 Only 3% of respondents said they were actively applying to the devolution programme with a further 38% possibly interested. Some (49%) of respondents wanted to know how to get further information and work has already started to ensure this guidance is

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easily accessible for our towns and parishes. When asked about parish planning, 44% of town and parish respondents felt extremely or very informed about parish planning. There are however over 20% who feel not so informed. These figures suggest that there is a significant potential for sharing of information and best practice amongst town and parish colleagues locally which would be particularly helpful for the 42% of respondents who are considering creating or revising a parish plan and the 36% who would like a conversation about starting one.

### *Support for future priorities*

- 5.9 Parish priorities over the coming months and years were varied and will have a wide-reaching impact at a local level. They included community engagement, community safety, community support, environmental initiatives and parish projects.
- 5.10 Through the community conversations various support needs were shared. Skill building through access to training was discussed along with wider sharing of information and resources with town and parish councils. There is a desire to work as partners and tap into support and advice from West Berkshire Council such as HR, consultation advice and risk assessment templates. That access to shared resources would help a more consistent approach, save time provide support for clerks.
- 5.11 In further exploring support needs, a couple of specific service areas were discussed in more detail. Some parishes expressed frustration about consultation processes with planning and a need to improve collaboration at earlier stages. A request for feedback and wider engagement with the community. Concerns were raised about limited enforcement regarding planning breaches.
- 5.12 Speeding in communities was also a priority for parishes and there was discussion about the process being clear from the outset. Participants would like to work in partnership with West Berkshire Council for the benefit of their communities. To do that they would like a clear procedure/advice on speed management initiatives and training for volunteer SID operatives.
- 5.13 Some other key themes were raised at the community conversations regarding Highways, improvements to the Report a Problem portal, rights of way contact points and clarification regarding the ownership of community assets.
- 5.14 Throughout all three community conversations, there was a strong desire to improve the relationship between West Berkshire Council and local town and parish councils. This included practical ideas as well as improving how we work together. The following key themes emerged:
- Access to resources and information
  - Sharing of best practice
  - Project Support
  - Working in partnership – operationally and strategically

### Co-designing improvement plans

5.14 The views of town and parish councils gathered through the surveys and community conversations led to the following themes for improvement being identified:

- Communications
- Engagement
- Customer services
- Resources
- Planning and delivering services together
- Building relationships with specific services: Planning and Road Safety.

5.15 Feedback gathered against each of these themes formed the basis of a series of workshops. During which, town and parish colleagues came together in facilitated sessions with Council officers to co-design improvements against each theme.

5.16 During each workshop, participants considered the specific improvements needed, which actions were needed to deliver them by the Council, how town and parishes can take action and how success will be understood. The draft Improvement Plans were tested back with participants and officers within the Council to ensure they accurately reflect the priorities for improvement and are deliverable. The Improvement Plan is in Appendix A.

## 6 Delivery and next steps

6.1 The Improvement Plan has been developed with the teams and officers impacted, shared with the Executive Directors, considered by Customer First Programme Board and Corporate Board. Feedback given to date has been incorporated within the Delivery Plan and the findings of the work will be fed into wider consideration of the Council's approach to customer engagement.

6.2 Delivery of several actions are already underway and so the next steps are to continue the focus on actions identified as a priority. Responsibility for delivery is dispersed across the Council and will therefore need a coordinated effort. This will be coordinated via the Officer Working Group already formed and with individual actions assigned to the most relevant officer or team.

## 7 Conclusion

7.1 In recognition of the valuable contribution that town and parish councils make, West Berkshire Council has committed to reviewing and improving engagement with local towns and parishes. This work is underpinned by a commitment to working alongside our communities.

7.2 Following significant engagement with Town and Parish Councils, this report has set out the key findings and themes which emerged. It has outlined the process to co-design an improvement plan and presents that Plan for agreement.

## 8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A – Town and Parish: Engagement Improvement Plan.

**Background Papers:**

[Communications and Engagement Strategy 2020-2023](#) (approved at Executive, October 2020)

**Subject to Call-In:**

Yes:  No:

- The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval
- Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council
- Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position
- Considered or reviewed by Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee or associated Task Groups within preceding six months
- Item is Urgent Key Decision
- Report is to note only

**Wards affected:** All

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# Appendix A