

A plan for the Parish Council

It's obvious that a few residents read council meeting minutes; and in order to make the content more interesting we've recently decided to publish councillor reports, over and above the planning report on the parish council website not only to increase transparency but also to improve public participation and engagement.

Early engagement allows the community to feel involved in the process of developing those services and generates momentum for further engagement opportunities. Currently, the Parish Council is given 15% (capped at £100/household) from any applicable Community Infrastructure Level to spend on a wide variety of projects; once the neighbourhood plan has been adopted, 25% (uncapped) of the CIL will be passed onto the Parish Council to be spent on wide variety of projects - we need to be in a better position to understand how that should be spent.

We want to, within our powers, develop and deliver services which benefit Warndon Parish. In order to develop those services, we also need to deliver effective community engagement. In my time attending Parish Council meetings and not just as a councillor, there have been a few suggestions for activities which would benefit the community (benches, table tennis tables, and the food bank for example) - the vast majority of community feedback received has been to raise concerns over issues affecting the parish.

The Queen's Speech, 2019, laid out a plan for a white paper setting out the "Government's ambitions...to enable decisions that affect local people to be made at a local level"; the release of the white paper has been delayed by the pandemic and may be subsumed into a forthcoming "Levelling up" white paper; however, all the advice the Parish Council has received to date is that we should be anticipating being given more responsibility for delivering services to the community.

Involving the community early in the service development process minimises resistance to the council's proposals, supports the community in making informed decisions and choices about the community we live in.

Principles for Engagement

It is important to plan out and be clear of the reason why we need to engage, how we will engage and the resources needed to deliver a plan successfully.

Outlined below are a few principals for successful engagement.

1. Careful Planning and Preparation

Careful planning that is inclusive is important. Clearly define the purpose of our engagement activities and outline the needs of participants. This should influence the way we plan, design and organise our engagement activities.

2. Inclusion and demographic diversity

Include the views of diverse people, voices, ideas, and information to lay the groundwork for quality outcomes and a democratic process.

3. Collaboration and Shared purpose

Support and encourage participants, stakeholders and the wider community to work together to advance the common good.

4. Openness and Learning

Help all involved listening to each other, exploring new ideas, do not pre-determine outcomes, learn and apply information in ways that generate new options, and rigorously evaluate public engagement activities for effectiveness.

5. Transparency and Trust

Be clear and open about the process, and provide a public record of the people who have organised and are carrying out the engagement, the partners involved, outcomes, and range of views and ideas expressed.

6. Impact and Action

Ensure each participatory effort has real potential to make a difference, and that participants are aware of that potential.

7. Sustained engagement and participatory culture

Promote a culture of participation and support ongoing quality of public engagement.

We need to outline how we will apply these principles in a practical way, and learn from our residents what it is they want us to achieve and how they want us to achieve it.

The environmental committee already has an objective to involve the community in developing a strategy to increase engagement with the natural environment in the Parish. The Parish Council has decided to formalise the relationship between the Council and volunteers within the Parish. Our new grants policy will give residents the opportunity to influence how a small proportion of the precept is spent, and we are committed to further improvements to the Parish Council website to help improve the flow of information from the Parish Council to the community. But if we are to become more relevant to the Parish we need to be listening more and implement a scheme of community engagement into the near future.