Corsham Town Council

Community Engagement Strategy

2022-2026

Making life in Corsham better through equality, accessibility, and inclusivity

1. INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is at the heart of Corsham Town Council's Strategic Plan for 2022-2026. While the key objectives focus on Environment and Climate Change, Transport and Highways, Business and the Economy, and Community Wellbeing, the central theme linking every element is: 'An engaged community – making life in Corsham better through equality, accessibility and inclusivity'.

The Town Council wants to ensure that local people feel well informed about local issues, have opportunities to get involved, can influence local decision making and are able to tell the Council what they think about its policies, procedures, service delivery and work with partner organisations. It is vital that the work of the Town Council is shaped and prioritised by the people who live and work in the parish of Corsham.

We also understand that a 'community' can be many things. It can be a community of place or neighbourhood, from a whole town to a housing estate or street. It can be a community of interest, linking groups who have a shared interest or experience. And it can be a community of identity, defined by how people identify themselves or how they are identified by society, usually by demographic characteristics (for example: young people, older people, disabled people, people with learning difficulties, faith groups, black and minority ethnic people, LGBTQ+ people.)
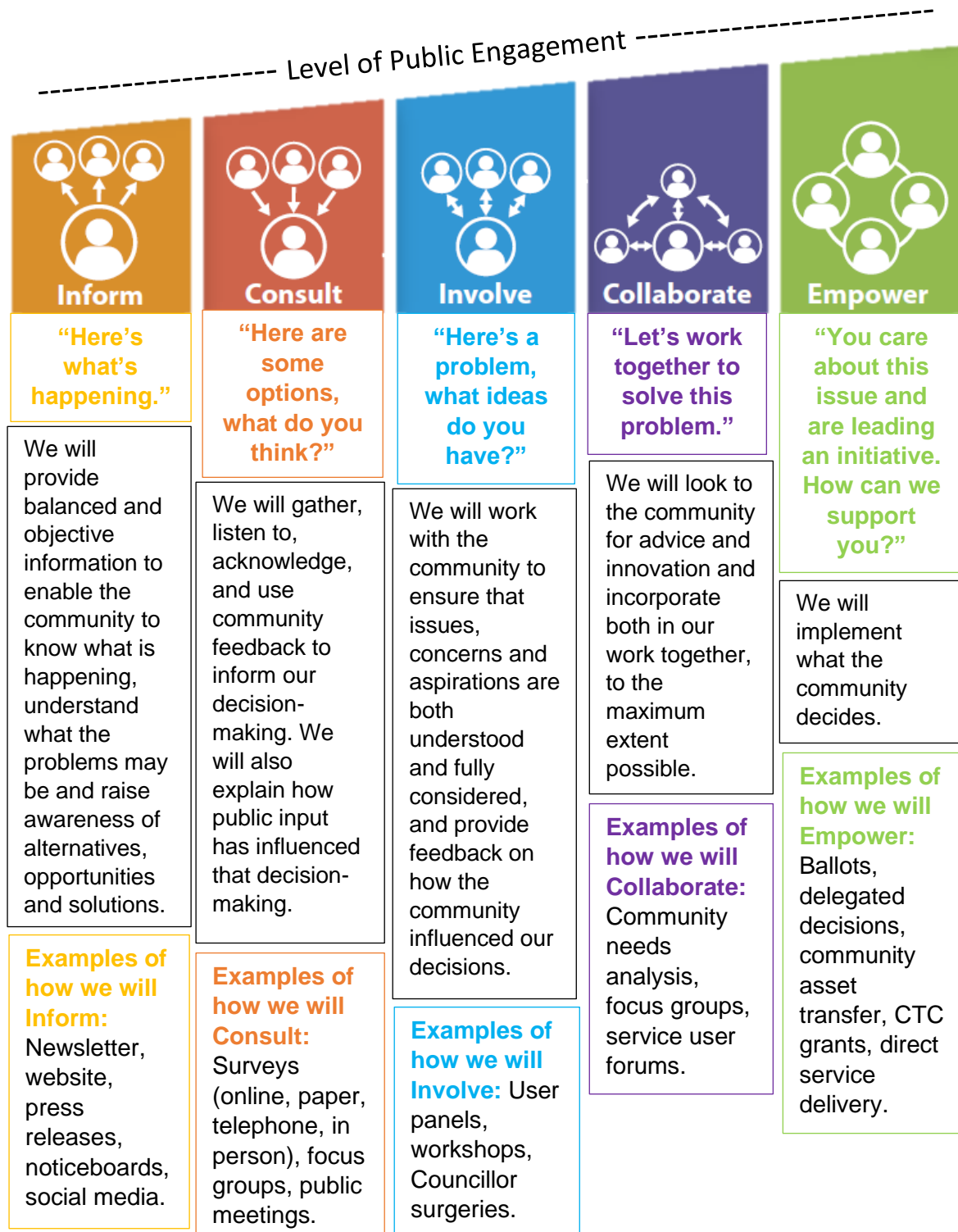
It is very important for us to understand different views within the community, ensuring that the needs of groups or areas that are under-represented or do not traditionally engage with us are not overlooked. By identifying how and where there is a lack of engagement, the Town Council can start to understand the barriers that might be stopping certain voices being heard and understand how best to communicate so that we meet the needs of the whole community more effectively.

So what do we mean by 'community engagement'? Community engagement is about giving people confidence, skills and power so that they can get involved, shape and influence the planning, development and delivery of our services. The Town Council sees there being Five Steps of Engagement (*see p3*): Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate and Empower, and every step is an important part of the process, with different methods used depending on the activity and the circumstances.

The purpose of this Community Engagement Strategy is to continue building on the good practices and positive relationships that already exist within the Town Council, but we want to do more. We want to improve the quality of our interaction activities; learn from our experiences by evaluating the ways in which we engage with local people and to continue increasing the number and diversity of people who engage with Corsham Town Council.

Community engagement is a powerful tool that can provide invaluable information and help to build confidence within the community, but only if it is meaningful; engagement must always have a purpose and we, as a Town Council, must be able to demonstrate the impact the responses have had on our decision-making. By undertaking that meaningful engagement and encouraging community involvement, the Town Council and the Corsham community can work together to make life in Corsham better through equality, accessibility, and inclusivity.

2. THE FIVE STEPS OF ENGAGEMENT

Level of Public Engagement

Inform

"Here's what's happening."

We will provide balanced and objective information to enable the community to know what is happening, understand what the problems may be and raise awareness of alternatives, opportunities and solutions.

Examples of how we will Inform: Newsletter, website, press releases, noticeboards, social media.

Consult

"Here are some options, what do you think?"

We will gather, listen to, acknowledge, and use community feedback to inform our decision-making. We will also explain how public input has influenced that decision-making.

Examples of how we will Consult: Surveys (online, paper, telephone, in person), focus groups, public meetings.

Involve

"Here's a problem, what ideas do you have?"

We will work with the community to ensure that issues, concerns and aspirations are both understood and fully considered, and provide feedback on how the community influenced our decisions.

Examples of how we will Involve: User panels, workshops, Councillor surgeries.

Collaborate

"Let's work together to solve this problem."

We will look to the community for advice and innovation and incorporate both in our work together, to the maximum extent possible.

Examples of how we will Collaborate: Community needs analysis, focus groups, service user forums.

Empower

"You care about this issue and are leading an initiative. How can we support you?"

We will implement what the community decides.

Examples of how we will Empower: Ballots, delegated decisions, community asset transfer, CTC grants, direct service delivery.

This diagram demonstrates the different levels of community engagement. It is important to know and understand what options are most suitable, depending on what needs to be achieved. In some cases, the community only needs information; in others, helping to empower communities may be more appropriate. As objectives and priorities change over time, approaches can be adapted or expanded to meet the needs of all involved.

3. BENEFITS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There are benefits to both the Town Council and the community when engagement activities are delivered well.

Community engagement helps the Town Council to:

- better understand and respond to the needs of local people.
- be more accountable to local people.
- plan and deliver better services.
- make more efficient use of public resources.
- take transparent decisions.
- build strong and positive relationships within and between local communities.
- test out ideas and explore emerging issues.
- measure the performance of the Council in delivering services.

The local community will:

- have a greater say and choice in the design and delivery of local services.
- become better informed about the Town Council's work.
- have better and more accessible conversations about the issues that matter to them.
- build trust and confidence with the Town Council.
- know how their participation and engagement has contributed to the decision-making process.
- develop new skills and expertise.

There are times, though, when community engagement is not appropriate, for example:

- If the decision is under strict direction from Government.
- If we have already recently asked for views on a similar topic.
- If the Town Council is in the process of implementing plans that have previously been adopted and to which it has committed significant resources.

When this is the case, we will still engage with the community by sharing information and informing them of decisions and, if necessary, explaining why engaging more widely is not a requirement in these instances.

4. HEALTHY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is a process, not a project. It must be authentic and meaningful, rather than a box to tick. It is about inviting members of the Corsham community into the decision-making process to assess, plan, implement, and evaluate solutions to issues that affect their daily lives and environments. As such, community engagement has to centre around trust, communication, and collaboration. Community participation should focus on – and result from – the needs, expectations, and desires of community members.

Having the opportunity to determine the circumstances of their daily lives means community engagement can enhance the health and wellbeing of Corsham's residents, while helping the Town Council make the best-informed decisions possible. Community members know what it is like to live where they do. They are experts in the challenges they face each day and know what changes could make fundamental differences to their lives. Authentic community engagement is also a powerful tool for discovering and cultivating the strengths

within communities – strengths that can then be used to support the Town Council's work, particularly in solving local challenges. Developing collaborative relationships between Councillors and the community can only benefit Corsham.

Corsham Town Council's Community Engagement Aim and Objectives

The aim of this strategy is to ensure local people feel well informed about local issues, have opportunities to get involved, influence local decision making and to tell the Town Council what they think about its policies, procedures, service delivery and work with partner organisations.

The following objectives set out how we are going to make certain that our engagement activity is flexible, focused and appropriate for the diverse needs of our community. The Town Council will:

Plan and co-ordinate activities, the use of resources and, where possible, work collaboratively.

Actively encourage involvement from all communities, including those from traditionally under-represented groups/areas.

Be open and creative to the most appropriate methods to consult and engage, making the experience interesting, relevant and worthwhile for participants.

Be transparent and build trust by communicating results and ensure that the outcomes are used to inform the Council's policies and decision-making processes.

Use the information from our engagement activities, alongside other evidence, to inform the design and delivery of effective and efficient services, within our current financial constraints.

Build relationships with communities so sustained engagement can be established.

These objectives will ensure that:

- Engagement is effective and influential.
- People are linked to decisions being made.
- Decisions better relate to community aspirations and needs.
- There is trust and confidence in the engagement process.

In following these objectives and undertaking the resulting key objectives (*Appendix 1),* we hope to strengthen community leadership and relationships, build upon our reputation, improve customer service and ultimately make Corsham a better place.

Our Values
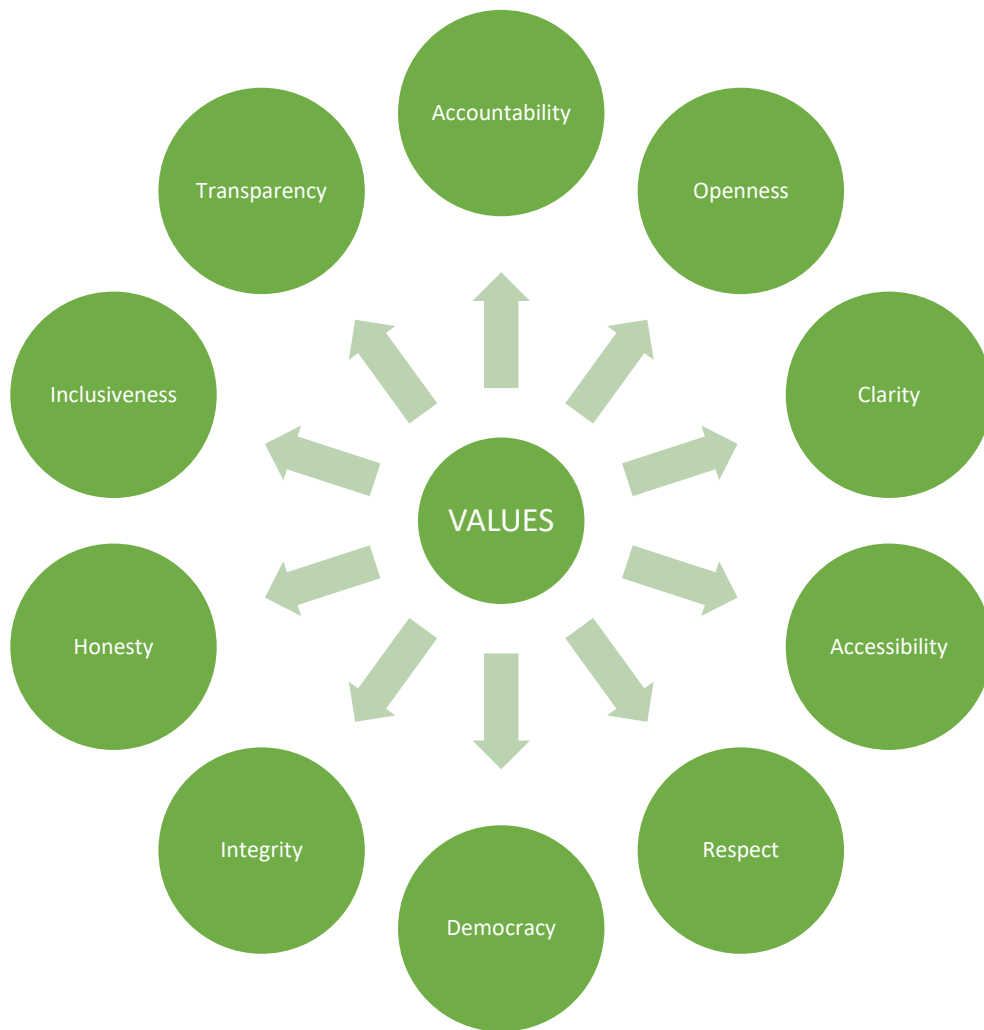
Engaging with Everyone

The Town Council wishes actively to engage with as many individuals and organisations as possible, including:

- Residents of Corsham
- Businesses and business organisations
- Community, voluntary, special interest, and residents' groups
- Older people
- Young people
- Families
- Hard-to-reach groups
- Public and private sector stakeholders
- MOD Corsham
- Bath Spa University
- Schools
- Health agencies (commissioners and providers)
- Visitors

Engagement will also be undertaken by Town Councillors and staff as active members of various community organisations (*see Appendix 2).*

Community engagement, and the resources used, must meet the needs of all people regardless of age, ability, gender or background. An equitable engagement process meets people where they are, considers the unique needs of each population group and ensures everyone benefits from the decision that is ultimately made. Healthy community engagement means carefully considering how barriers may affect people's ability to participate. We are aware that there are some people who very rarely get involved with what is happening in their local area. These may be people who do not know about what is happening, are not confident or able to get involved, may not wish, or have the time, to be involved or may simply be happy with the decisions being made. These people are sometimes called 'hard-to-reach' or 'seldom heard' or 'hard to hear' groups.

Examples of Hard-to-Reach Groups

Hard to reach groups are groups of people who may be, or feel, excluded from engagement due to their personal circumstances or previous experiences. Disadvantaged groups may find it more difficult than normal to get involved. The involvement of people whose voices may or may not be heard, or who can be marginalised, must be given particular consideration. Age, disability, race (including ethnicity and nationality), religion or belief, gender, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity and marriage or civil partnership status (the nine protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010), should not stop someone from getting involved. Under the Act, the Town Council has a duty to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, advance equality of opportunity and promote good relations between different parts of the community.

While Town Councils are not legally obliged to create Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) for their work, using a template EIA when appropriate *(see Appendix 3)* would help to identify the impact of any new or changing activities on protected groups and guide the Town Council in its community engagement.

The Town Council will use resources towards monitoring and identifying those who are not involved and ensure they have the opportunity to be involved should they wish. This is particularly important where a specific community may be directly affected by the decisions made.

To ensure that more of these members of the Corsham community can participate in the community engagement process, we will ensure our engagement opportunities are *inclusive* (actively including people who are usually excluded or at risk of being excluded), *safe* (ensuring no social, emotional or financial repercussions result from participation) and *culturally appropriate* (considerate and accommodating to cultural differences that may impact a person's abilities or preferences when it comes to participating). Considering different ways to engage and communicate helps seldom heard groups, but also benefits everyone and is good practice.

We are also mindful of digital exclusion. Alongside the more traditional methods of community engagement, such as paper surveys or face-to-face meetings, digital engagement has, and will be, a tool the Town Council uses more. We have found engagement and levels of participation increase as a result of online surveys and meetings. People can participate wherever they are located, making previous barriers such as transport, childcare or working hours easier to overcome. Despite this, we are very aware of digital exclusion and will not be using digital methods as the only tools we use, to ensure that certain people or groups within our community are not left behind, and always have an opportunity to engage with us.

Removing barriers to taking part means that, when Town Councillors invite the Corsham community to play a meaningful role in making decisions about where they live, everyone in that community is able to have a voice. When community members are genuinely and actively involved in improving their community, those improvements are more likely to be effective and sustainable.

5. CHECKLIST FOR INVOLVEMENT

Before undertaking community engagement, and having decided what level of engagement is appropriate (*see The Five Steps of Engagement on p3*), the Town Council will consider the following:

Who should be involved?

- We will consider who in the Corsham community should be involved, who will be directly affected by the decision, who has expertise to offer, and who may need extra help to get involved.
- We will take advice from other relevant groups on who to involve and how.
- We will use our resources to make sure the people identified have the opportunity to get involved.

- We will think about who else we can work with to engage with as many people within the community as possible.

Why are people being involved?

- We will be clear about why the community is being involved.
- We will be clear about what decision is being made and why they are being asked to get involved.
- We will make sure everyone is properly informed of the facts and background.
- We will be clear about what can and cannot be changed.

Timing of involvement

- We will start the engagement process as early as we can, depending on the project/issue.
- We will allow enough time for as many people as possible to take part.
- We will give plenty of notice of community engagement events and hold them at various times and locations to make sure a wide range of people can attend.
- We will co-ordinate with other consultations run by partner organisations.

How people will be involved

- Community engagement should be planned in an environmentally sensitive way.
- Community engagement should be planned in a culturally sensitive way.
- Involvement should be at an appropriate scale, depending on the impact the decision will have.
- Accessible venues should be used when possible, with physical access, proximity to those most affected by a decision, and access to transport services, childcare, etc, all considered.
- Communication should be clear, well-organised, simply written and explained.
- A range of community engagement methods should be used and should be as creative and as interactive as possible, to encourage people to take part, particularly hard-to-reach groups.

6. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Monitoring and evaluating community engagement is key to reflecting on what is working well and where improvements can be made, as well as assessing the impact of the engagement work being undertaken.

The amount of monitoring and evaluation required may be different depending on the level of engagement needed, but both should play an important part in the process.

Regular monitoring during a period of community engagement will highlight, for instance, whether the right communities are engaging, in what numbers (we may want to set specific targets) and whether their responses (both quantitative and qualitative) are telling the Town Council what it needs to know. This will allow us to change the process where necessary, for example using different promotional methods to ensure the best response and widest range of engagement.

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The benefits of evaluating our engagement activity are many. Evaluation can help to:

- Improve our practice.
- Demonstrate the impact of our activity.
- Help raise funding from other sources.
- Prove the value and benefit of our activity.
- Provide evidence.
- Provide a record of achievement.
- Demonstrate value for money.
- Inform future activities and improve them.
- Inform the practice of other groups and stakeholders.

Outputs, Outcomes and Impacts

When evaluating community engagement, it is helpful to differentiate between outputs, outcomes and impacts as these provide useful ways to define the ways in which community engagement can contribute to change, over time.

Outputs are usually tangible and easy to capture. Examples of community engagement outputs might be:

- Online resources
- Events and exhibitions
- Publications (newsletter, press coverage)
- Partnerships
- People (numbers and demographics of those engaged)

Outcomes are the results of community engagement activity and are usually immediate. Typical outcomes, for both the Town Council and those participating, might include:

- Increased understanding of the topic/issue
- Attitudinal change
- Inspiration and creativity
- Skills development

Impacts are longer-term and can be categorised into three types:

- Conceptual impacts: these can be thought of as changes to how people think – changes in knowledge, understanding, attitude or awareness.
- Capacity building impacts: these can be thought of as changes in what people do – participation or skills development.
- Instrumental impacts: these can be thought of as changes in how things work – changes to policies, behaviour or practices.

These monitoring and evaluation processes will also help us in mapping Corsham's varied communities and increasing our knowledge about, and understanding of, the people the Town Council represents.

As and when community engagement activities come to an end, the results will be shared with the relevant working groups, Committees or Full Council, as well as with the wider community (*see p11*).

The Head of Community Services will also produce an annual Community Engagement report for Councillors and publication online and in paper form.

7. HOW ARE DECISIONS MADE?

Many different considerations are taken into account before decisions are made by the Town Council. The findings from our community engagement will form one, highly important, part of the information we use. Other sources, depending on the project or issue, could be specialist/expert advice, research studies, national or local guidance, professional opinions and local knowledge. All these considerations may need to be taken into account and weighted accordingly before a final decision is reached.

Most significant Town Council decisions often require the support and approval of Town Councillors at Council meetings, either in person (Full Council) or online. Members of the public are able to join both types of meeting, are able to speak or ask questions or present petitions on topics of local concern. More information on this is available at www.corsham.gov.uk or by contacting the Town Hall.

8. WHAT HAPPENS TO THE RESULTS?

Effective community engagement will help the Town Council to understand our local community's needs and aspirations, which will help us deliver good quality services and better outcomes.

To show that we have listened after a community engagement consultation, we will:

- Publish a summary of feedback received and our response to it.
- Show how the results have been used to influence final decisions.
- Feedback the results and the decision to those who took the time to get involved.

When we deal with responses from the local community, we will keep to relevant data protection laws (currently the Data Protection Act 2018, the UK's implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2022-2026
APPENDIX 1

OBJECTIVES AND KEY ACTIONS

Our Aim
Ensure that local people feel well informed about local issues and have opportunities to get involved, influence local decision-making and tell the Town Council what they think about its polices, procedures, service delivery and work with partner organisations.

Objectives	Key Actions
Plan and co-ordinate activities, the use of resources and, where possible, work collaboratively.	• Identify who (Officers/Councillors) will be responsible for each community engagement activity. • Identify external stakeholders to contact. • Keep Councillors, staff, stakeholders updated on initial plans.
Actively encourage involvement from all communities, including those from traditionally under-represented groups/areas.	• Undertake stakeholder mapping, working with the voluntary and community sector. • Tailor engagement methods to meet the specific needs of communities. • Undertake engagement in partnership with Councillors and communities.
Be open and creative to the most appropriate methods to consult and engage, making the experience interesting, relevant, and worthwhile, for participants.	• Go to where the communities are and use the platforms they use and formats they are comfortable with. • Provide support to those running the engagement activities (eg engagement toolkit)
Be transparent and build trust by communicating results and ensure that the outcomes are used to inform the Council's policies and decision-making process.	• The results of all engagement activities are made available to the public. • Ensure the Town Council demonstrates the impact of engagement on the decision-making process.
Use the information from our engagement activities, alongside other evidence, to inform the design and delivery of effective and efficient services (within financial constraints).	• Compile an annual report on the Town Council's community engagement activities. • Improve how we use engagement data in the delivery of services.
Build relationships with communities so sustained engagement can be established.	• Maintain an ongoing dialogue with representatives of our communities to build unconditional and mutually supportive relationships.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2022-2026
APPENDIX 2

PARTNER AND STAKEHOLDER CONSULTEES

The Town Council will inform, consult with, and involve our partners and stakeholders, and co-ordinate our community engagement efforts through actively being involved in various community organisations, including:

- Bath Spa University Liaison Panel
- Corsham Chamber of Commerce
- Corsham Climate Action
- Corsham Local Highway and Footpath Improvement Group
- Corsham for Walking
- Corsham Local Youth Network
- Corsham Twinning Association
- Corsham Youth Council
- Fairtrade
- MOD Community Liaison Panel
- Pound Arts Trust Ltd
- The Corsham School Liaison Panel
- Sports Forum
- Retail Forum

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2022-2026
APPENDIX 3

TEMPLATE EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT – POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

To which equality groups is the community engagement relevant and why?

- Age
- Disability
- Race (including ethnicity and nationality)
- Religion or belief
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Gender reassignment
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Marriage or civil partnership

Would undertaking community engagement (or its outcomes/impacts) lead to discrimination (direct or indirect), harassment, victimisation, less favourable treatment for particular equality groups?

Would undertaking community engagement (or its outcomes/impacts) contribute to advancing equality of opportunity?

Is there an opportunity in undertaking community engagement (or from its outcomes/impacts) to foster good relations?

Would undertaking community engagement (or its outcomes/impacts) create barriers for any other groups?

How will community engagement be made accessible to all groups, if relevant?

How will equality groups or communities be involved in the community engagement and its outcomes/impacts?

Is there any potential for, or actual impact from, undertaking community engagement (and/or its outcomes/impacts) with regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality and promote good relations?

How will community engagement be progressed and what is the rationale for the decision?

i)   No change required – the engagement process and its potential outcomes/impacts are robust

ii)   Adjustments required – remove barriers to better advance equality of engagement and/or to foster good relations.

iii) Continue with the engagement process despite the potential for adverse impact, which can be mitigated.

iv)   Stop community engagement as the adverse effects of engagement and its outcomes/impacts cannot be prevented/mitigated.