



'Back of a Clipboard'
Engagement List

A Starter Kit for Frontline Councillors

Introduction

Below is a five-stage starter kit for being as engaged as possible with your residents and local businesses.

It was written by Cllr Peter Lamb, based on his experiences as a local councillor in Crawley.

In all of the engagement you do, however, be aware that your role as councillor exists in two capacities.

The first is as a representative of the council (and there is advice both from your council and from the LGA on how to do this).

The second is as a representative of your political party (if you are in one), and you'll have separate guidance on this.

A big part of getting the engagement right will be in balancing these two things - so you're able to fulfil your role both as a representative of the council in the community, and as a representative of community concerns within the council.



1. Get out there

With new technology connecting us, it's all too easy to forget that the best way to engage is often face-to-face. Not every part of the community has the ability to regularly access the internet. And online communication usually requires residents to opt-in to hear what you have to say, meaning in some cases, you 'preach to the converted'. Many still prefer to speak to a real person.

- **Advice Surgeries.** These provide residents with the opportunity to meet you and raise any issues they might have. All that's needed is an accessible venue, somewhere to sit and a bit of advertising.
 - Select a well-known local venue (avoid venues which put off parts of the community, such as pubs, religious buildings, or places without disabled access)
 - Choose a regular date for your surgery, such as the first Saturday of the month
 - Publicise to the local community through as many channels as possible
 - Consider running the surgery alongside other public officials. i.e. local MP or neighbourhood police team
- **Mobile surgeries.** Surgeries that aren't in a fixed place each time provide an opportunity to reach out to harder-to-engage parts of the community, instead of waiting for residents to come to a venue.
 - Select an area you want to engage with, and alert people that you'll be in the area, for example by putting a leaflet out to the houses you plan to contact
 - It's important that you follow through on that commitment, so some effort is needed to estimate the number of doors you'll realistically be able to knock
 - Bring equipment with you to write down people's issues and something to leave at the premises you knock so people know how to get in touch with you
 - Many won't raise any specific issues, but mobile surgeries are still important for building relationships and making residents more likely to reach out in future
- **Community events.** One of the best ways of engaging with your local community is through participating in local events.
 - There are a huge range of events, from meetings of local residents associations and neighbourhood watch meetings to school fêtes and street parties
 - This is a simple way of meeting a wide range of local residents, particularly those with strong community links

2. Keep people in the loop

Though people are busy, most would still like to know what is going on in their community. And regular information from local representatives can help to build the trust upon which future engagement can be based.

There is much anecdotal evidence to support the assertion that people are more receptive to engagement that informs and are far less keen on engagement that seeks to promote a particular point of view or sectional interest.

Propaganda is completely counterproductive. Here are a few ways of keeping your residents in the loop effectively:

- **Newsletters.** Give some thought to the design.
 - Keep content interesting and relevant, using no more than 100 words per story, and pictures where possible
 - Include your contact details, and any social media channels you'd like residents to follow. Consider including local surveys, petitions and response slips
 - To comply with the Data Protection Act, you'll need (at minimum) to make it clear on the response slip what you intend to use their data for, and to store and dispose of any personal data securely
- **Direct Mail.** People will often read letters which come through their door, particularly if they're addressed to them personally. While direct mail may be too expensive for regular newsletters, it can be useful for communicating about a particularly important issue. For example, when planning permission is being sought for a project which you do not believe is in the area's best interests, it may help drive up the number of objections. Although be aware that, if you're on a planning committee yourself, this isn't allowed.
- **e-newsletters and Text Messages.** A fast and cheap way of reaching residents.
 - Online services like MailChimp are a good idea, as anything involving complex designs or mail outs to a large number of people are likely to be blocked without one
 - Similar sites can also be used to send mass text messages
 - Overuse of emails and texts is likely to result in people unsubscribing (an option it's important to include)

Remember, no council resources can legally be used for party political communications, so be clear whether you are acting as a representative of the council or of your party when you are sending out a communication. If you're uncertain, it's always best to ask.

3. Reach out

Networks of engagement already exist which can help you to connect with your residents. Here are a few ways of reaching out.

- **Make the most of the council.** Although communications and community engagement teams have been put under pressure due to budget cuts, almost every local authority still employs officers in these roles. Ask them how they can help you engage.
 - Council communications officers know the best points of contact with local media
 - They can help with publicity around non-political issues and are largely responsible for the council's outbound communication channels, which may include neighbourhood newsletters/e-newsletters
 - Make sure you are copied into all the relevant mailing lists, from neighbourhood newsletters to planning applications and the forward plan
 - Community engagement officers should be able to signpost you to local resident's groups and help to identify key points of contact within your neighbourhood (such as Police Community Support Officers)
- **Work with other agencies.** Reach out and partner with parish councils, neighbourhood policing teams or the many other bodies which represent residents.
 - Spread messages collectively across mailing lists
 - Co-locate community engagement events, such as neighbourhood police teams attending councillor advice surgeries
 - Consider providing a multi-agency approach to the resolution of local problems
- **Community networks.** Highly-connected people influence community opinion. To persuade them is to persuade others. Examples may include the chair of a residents' association, school governors and long-serving teachers, local small businesspeople and publicans, religious leaders and neighbourhood watch co-ordinators.

4. Use the media

Despite the rise of newer channels, 'traditional media' remains an important means of communication.

- **Local newspapers.** The falling number of local reporters means that newspapers are more willing to accept content.
 - Letters are the easiest way of getting a message into a paper
 - A press release will often get the attention of local journalists, especially if it's well-written and gives enough information and context
 - Many local newspapers are increasingly open to the offer of guaranteed content that can fill regular community-focused columns. Stories accompanied by a good picture are even more likely to be published
 - Local newspapers remain a source of news for local representatives and the letters section provides a good way of picking up strongly-felt sentiments
- **TV/Radio.** TV and radio remain popular channels, and while the opportunity to communicate a message via the airwaves is rare, the potential reach is considerable.
 - Regional news still features at the end of national news broadcasts, and a number of local radio stations retain a solid listenership
 - Both will run local news stories if they believe them interesting to their audience
 - Responding to a journalist's tweet can result in them making direct contact with you or in your comment being read out on the air
- **Blogs/Online Radio.** Some local news blogs and online radio sites now have a similar audience size to their analogue equivalents.
 - Consider adding their contact details to your mailing list for press releases or making direct contact to see if there are more effective ways to engage
 - It's common for councillors to get online columns on news blogs or to regularly broadcast via online radio

5. Go digital

'Digital media' can offer a global audience, yet fail to make solid contact with the community you want it to. As with any media channel, it also poses some risks. You should be aware that the content you produce through these channels will be available for years to come and so you may find yourself held to account a misjudged comment. Nonetheless, digital channels can be powerful if used in the right way.

- **Google Alerts.** A service provided by Google, once you've put a term in, you will receive an email whenever a new story relating to it is published online, allowing you to keep on top of issues that are important in your local areas for example a supermarket development
- **FixMyStreet.** Users submit practical problems in the community - like a broken paving slab or some graffiti - to the local authority, and councillors can respond and comment.
- **Facebook.** Individual councillors often don't automatically attract huge numbers of local residents to their profile, groups or pages. This doesn't mean it isn't useful for engaging - just that you can't expect residents to come to you.
 - To engage effectively using Facebook you need to identify where residents congregate - official pages, like that of a local newspaper, the council or a resident's association, or a less formal group, such as one based around local nostalgia.
 - Facebook advertising is a paid service that enables messages to be directly aimed at people based on a range of criteria, including locality and demographic
- **Twitter.** As with Facebook, Twitter offers a potentially global reach but requires people to actively engage with you.
 - If you follow local news sources, it is a good way of keeping up to speed with what is going on in your area in almost real time
 - It provides an efficient way of making a public statement on an issue
 - It enables you to directly contact key figures who may be able to help spread your message wider
- **NextDoor:** As a neighbourhood based forum for local people to exchange ideas, this site offers an attempt to bridge the gap between the global audience the internet offers and the local issues people often want to raise.

- **Surveys/polls/petitions.** While you will also need to use other methods to advertise your survey, poll or petition, online can be a powerful two-way route to community engagement. The ability to force action gives residents an incentive to sign and so makes the petition more likely to have an impact.
 - There are various ways of running a survey or a poll online for free, including on Facebook or Twitter
 - For a more bespoke service, one of the most commonly used is Survey Monkey
 - Platforms for running petitions, meanwhile, include sites like change.org - these can offer a different way of getting local people involved in campaigns
- **Personal website or blog.** A channel of communication exclusively within your control.
 - A councillor's website doesn't have to be anything complicated: a brief personal introduction, a decent headshot, your contact details and links to your social media channels
 - A blog hosted on a site like WordPress is easy to run and allows you to make arguments of the length you choose, which you can then link to from your social media account(s)

This guide was compiled by Cllr Peter Lamb, Leader of Crawley Council.