

# Runnymede Borough Council

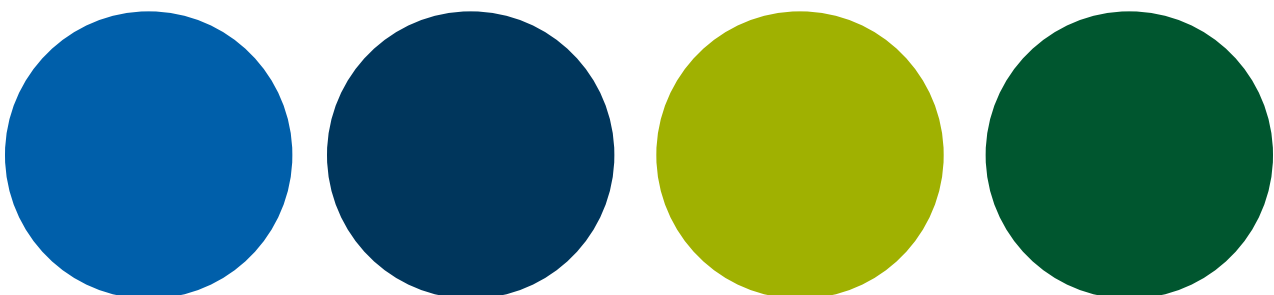
## Empowering our Communities Strategy

Draft version July 2022



# Empowering our Communities

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# Introduction and context

**Many councils talk about ‘empowering their communities’ but the phrase can mean different things in different locations. This strategy aims to set out what is relevant to Runnymede and what we believe will make a difference to the quality of life we seek for our residents.**

We are fortunate enough to have a voluntary sector that is active and highly motivated.

This became very clear in the community response to the Covid pandemic but there have been previous events such as the floods of 2014, where community groups played a significant role in the Borough’s response.

Our role will be to ensure that we understand the priorities expressed by our communities, changing needs and requirements, nurturing and enhancing community involvement in everything we do.

There are two other important challenges:

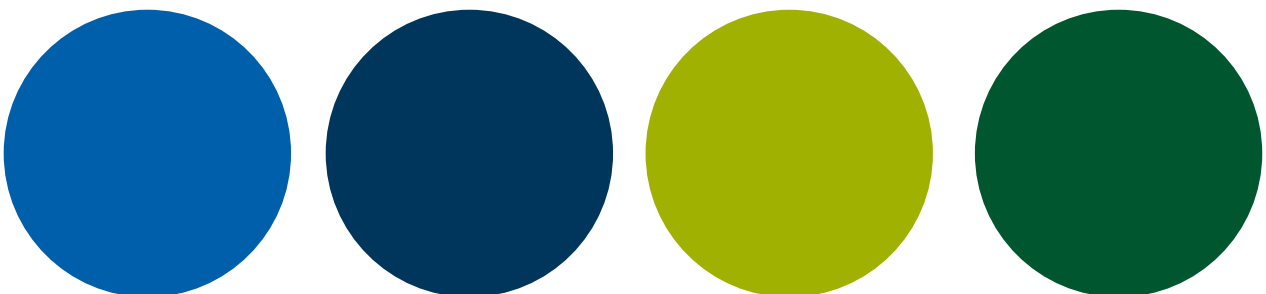
- ▶ To ensure we identify, understand and respond to the needs of our less privileged communities, and

- ▶ To make the most of the synergies between partners to address complex and often multi-faceted challenges.

That is what this strategy aims to do, with seven key priorities for the Council over the next five years.

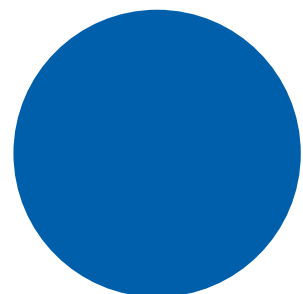
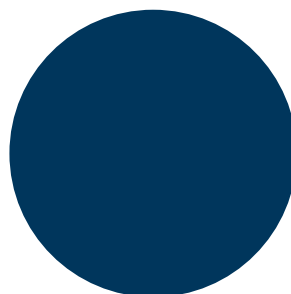
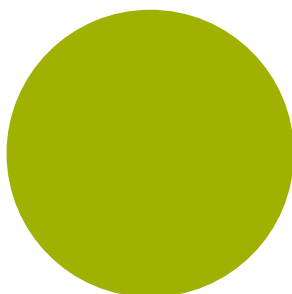
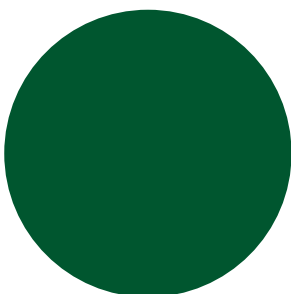
This is one of four outward facing strategies which are being developed as part of the Council’s new Corporate Plan; the other three being concerned with economic recovery and prosperity, climate change and environmental improvement and health and wellbeing. There is also strategy on organisational development.

All of these strategies are related and to a large extent, underpinned by our approach to Empowering our Communities.



# This strategy's priorities

- 1** Evidence-based decision making.
- 2** Listening to our residents.
- 3** Enabling communities to help themselves.
- 4** Enabling communities to take control of services or plans for their areas.
- 5** Advocacy: standing up and pressing Government and other organisations to meet Runnymede residents' priorities.
- 6** Working effectively with partner organisations.
- 7** Dealing with inequalities. Identifying those pockets of deprivation that exist in Runnymede and where particular cohorts in the population are not benefitting from the relative prosperity of the area. This could be because of skills, poorer housing, reduced access to education and life chances or physical factors such as poor transport and access to facilities.



# Evidence-based decision making

**The quality of decisions made on behalf of our residents is going to be determined largely by listening to our residents and examining evidence and data that informs our decisions.**

Listening to the views of residents requires a range of techniques. Not all residents are readily accessible and able to give us their opinions. Social media enables us to access harder to reach groups and elicit views which were elusive in previous years.

In some cases, it is better to have a dialogue with our residents so that they are informed of the choices and constraints faced by a local authority.

Quantitative analysis can give us an overview of the perception of our services, concerns people have about their communities and environment and aspirations they may hold.

Qualitative research gives us the opportunity for in depth analysis and exploration of new ideas and ways of working with our communities and to examine the views of communities of interest whether that be young people, BME communities, older people or families.

## Our approach

To ensure that we can reach all parts of the community including BME and hard to reach groups we propose to take the following approach:

- ▶ Reinvalidate our Citizens' Panel which will comprise up to 900 residents. This will enable us to conduct general surveys which will give a statistically significant information and to conduct qualitative research with smaller groups.

The Citizens' Panel will be drawn up to be representative of the population as a whole by age, gender (including gender status), ethnicity and location so that all parts of the Borough, and all communities, are represented.

- ▶ Use social media to gauge general opinion. This is the preferred route for many of the younger generations and whilst it may not give a statistically accurate sample, Facebook, Twitter and Nextdoor are useful tools to give a guide to public opinion.

- ▶ Where appropriate, set up regular group meetings to help improve services. Examples will include a residents' climate change group to examine those initiatives which will make the most difference, a leisure users' group to encourage health and wellbeing, and flood action groups. We will consult residents on what they would find most useful.

## Better use of data

Another aspect of evidence-based decision making is data and analytics.

There is a library of information available to help inform our approach to key areas of the Council's work including:

- economic development analysis,
- health and wellbeing information,
- crime statistics, and
- ward-based data.

We will utilise the availability of this information to improve the quality of our decision making and help inform our dialogue with residents.

There are good examples of initiatives used elsewhere in Surrey and further afield that have had the most effect and could be transferable to Runnymede.

## Case study: Evidence gathering with Housing Service tenants

The Council's Housing Service is responsible for around 3,000 homes. These properties are occupied by people from our Housing Register who come from a range of backgrounds.

Our housing ranges from Surrey Towers located in Addlestone, to Independent Retirement Living sites, blocks of flats and individual houses.

During the past 12 months, the Housing Service has delivered a step change in the range and frequency of its engagement with tenants. This work has been spearheaded by Corporate Head of Housing Andy Vincent and delivered at ground level by recently recruited Engagement and Inclusion Officer Kate Hall.

The development of new policies to govern the service's activities, and its planning for dealing with issues, has been interwoven with face to face and online conversations, surveys and evidence gathering events. These have included:

- A multi-agency estate day to gather information about anti-social behaviour in Addlestone.
- Coffee mornings with older tenants to explain



**An IRL tenant giving her views to Kate Hall**

planned improvement work at Independent Retirement Living sites, and to gather feedback.

- A Pets in the Park event to bring dog owners together in order to survey them and discuss ideas for a forthcoming pets in the home policy.
- A printed tenants' newsletter has been distributed multiple times. This allows for engagement and requests for input from people who are not regular internet users.

The Council's website now includes a dedicated consultations section and the Housing service has made significant use of this to gather data digitally which can be easily analysed.

## Actions

**1**

**Formulate an engagement strategy including reference to communities in deprived areas. The primary tool emanating from this will be the re-launch of the Citizens' Panel as a representative sample of the Runnymede community. This will subsequently be used to draw standing panels for individual issues and consultations, including on climate change. The panel will also be used to select focus groups for specific topics.**

**2**

**To ensure that wherever appropriate, reports on development of policies and strategies or projects involving significant expenditure are based on evidence and data which reflects residents' views.**

## Community initiatives and facilities

There are numerous examples from the last corporate planning cycle of individuals and groups taking the initiative themselves to improve quality of life in their communities.



The team at Holme Farm receiving a grant from the Council.

- ▶ A series of initiatives were taken by the Forest Estate residents in Englefield Green where an old community hall has been refurbished to house a number of clubs such as a breakfast and after school club. It is now a hub for social gatherings, enhancing community spirit and cohesion and enabling residents to mix in a way that didn't exist before.
- ▶ The 'Men's Workshops' proposal in New Haw. With the assistance of the local MP, Dr Ben Spencer, the initiators of this proposal have managed to persuade Defra to gift them a piece of land which will house a number of workshops for crafts, wood and metal working and a number of outside facilities involving horticulture and ecological pursuits. This is the brain-child of an older resident in the Borough and is going to enable many generations to come to take advantage of the opportunities offered.
- ▶ The establishment of 'The Lit' a trust based in Egham High Street which has taken over the Literary Institute. As well as housing Egham Museum, the Lit is developing a range of community and arts facilities which will add much to the town centre offer.

These examples demonstrate the energy and imagination of the community. The Council wants to encourage more of these projects as does the county council.

We will work on the provision of a Runnymede fund to assist with a range of community initiatives, particularly where there is evidence of support and need from the local community.

We will also seek to combine sources of funding whether that be from government, charitable or county resources to make the most of grants that become available.



Forest Estate Community Hub volunteers



## Best value from grants

There are some elements of work which are best carried out within the voluntary sector, often because voluntary organisations can achieve better value for money or are closer to their communities.

It is important however, where resources are scarce, that grants to the voluntary sector further the objectives of the Corporate Plan and do so in a way which provides best value for money.

Regular reviews of grants are necessary but this must be balanced against allowing voluntary organisations sufficient time to have impact.

Mature authorities do this through service level agreements that incorporate at least three year funding arrangements and ensure that services provided are still relevant and that organisations are performing well.

## Using our community venues well

During the pandemic, the Council's two halls have been used to support NHS efforts with testing and vaccination.

Now is the time to consider making the most of our community estate and consider how we can make more of the facilities we have which include community and day centres.

Some of these facilities have been well used and are valued by the communities that use them whilst some others have not been used to maximum effect.



Chertsey Hall



Hythe Centre

## Actions

**1**

Support and nurture the development of community initiatives and encourage communities which lack key facilities to form groups to work on community initiatives and self help schemes.

**2**

Seek to establish a Runnymede Local Initiatives Fund to pump prime community projects and facilitate access to other sources of funding.

**3**

To review our community assets and estate to ensure we are optimising usage to meet a variety of community needs and interest.

**4**

To review all grants to voluntary organisations on a three-year basis with an annual assessment of performance.

## Competing for resources

**Whilst Runnymede has been reasonably successful in obtaining grant funding from Government, the national position is a competitive one. There is a requirement to have projects ready to go to lever in Government resources as soon as new initiatives are announced.**

The Council and Surrey County Council were successful recently in levering in £44m for improvements to the A320.

This set of roundabout improvements provides the means by which housing development in the western part of the Borough can take place and this is an integral part of the Council's Local Plan.

To obtain this funding required months of work on the part of the Council's Economic Development officers and demonstrated that to be successful with small or large projects requires local authorities to be prepared.

The Council recruited a Bid Writer in January 2022, whose sole purpose will be to identify and prepare bids, especially for funding for major projects.

The Council's success in dealing with climate change will rest partly on its ability to lever in new resources, as it will with 'green' economic development projects.

There will also be opportunities to bid for community funding and we will develop networks to enable a rapid and flexible approach to funding opportunities.

New alliances will be necessary with the private sector, particularly in relation to initiatives such as solar farms, new sources of sustainable energy, electric vehicle charging, e-bikes, car hire and investment in biodiversity.

Finally, there will need to be close working with Surrey County Council on climate change as there will be with neighbouring boroughs and districts.

### Actions

**1**

**Seek new opportunities for funding economic infrastructure and climate change initiatives.**

**2**

**Seek new sources of funding for community initiatives.**

**3**

**Work with neighbouring authorities and the county council on regional initiatives to secure funding for the county.**

**4**

**To seek to be prepared and able to bid for resources through the work of the Council's new Bid Writer, but with input from the Strategic Leadership Team where appropriate to be prepared to compete for major sources of funding.**

# Neighbourhood planning

**The Government has encouraged local communities to consider developing neighbourhood plans. Neighbourhood plans sit within the framework of Runnymede Borough Council's Local Plan which was adopted in 2019.**

There is currently one approved Neighbourhood Plan covering parts of Thorpe. Others are in progress covering areas of Virginia Water, Englefield Green and Ottershaw. Neighbourhood plans can have several benefits for local communities by:

- Setting local policies and design guidelines that help to protect or formulate the character of an area.
- Helping to grant planning permissions through Neighbourhood Development Orders and Community Right to Build Orders.
- Providing a vision for an area.
- Ensuring that local communities have a say in the spending of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds to be used for the provision of essential local community facilities.

A fund has been established by the Council to assist with neighbourhood planning and officer time will be available, which is essential in developing the plan. Further resources can be applied for from central government.

Runnymede Borough Council will continue to support all local residents' groups who wish to go down this route.

## Case study: Creating Thorpe's Neighbourhood Plan



Thorpe village

In May 2021, Thorpe's Neighbourhood Plan was approved by the Council.

The community-led initiative was several years in the making and brought together residents with ideas and ward councillors. Consultations were carried out and detailed development work brought it to fruition.

The voluntary group were supported by Council officers with technical advice. The Council also has a role in designating the area which the plan applied to.

To ensure the wider community supported the plan's aims and policies, a referendum was organised by the Council. There was overwhelming support and since 30 June 2021, the plan has been taken into consideration by the Council's Planning Committee when applications for development within its area have been debated.

## Actions

- 1** Ensure that communities understand the potential benefits of neighbourhood planning and that forums are in place.
- 2** To support communities who want to develop their own neighbourhood plan with financial and professional support.

## Representing residents on the wider stage

This is a huge area of work for the Council, consuming substantial staff and member time. However, it is vitally important that as a Council we punch above our weight in representing the needs and aspirations of our community. As well as the work we do ourselves, we will seek to work with other boroughs and districts and the county council to produce the most powerful case we can to Government for investment in Surrey.



The Runnymede channel is the route of the RTS through our Borough

### River Thames Scheme

Runnymede is a small area covering 80 square miles. However it is economically important, housing some of the world's leading companies.

It has the highest gross value added (GVA) of any of the 11 districts in Surrey. This economic vitality needs to be balanced against the Borough as a place to live ensuring that quality of life remains a top priority too.

There are several important challenges. The top priority is to ensure that the River Thames Scheme (RTS), a flood alleviation programme to benefit 6,000 homes and businesses in Runnymede goes ahead as quickly as possible.

Runnymede and Surrey County Council have made a major investment in the RTS alongside a substantial government investment in excess of £250m. The Council will play a key role co-ordinating the planning consents required.

The RTS involves building two diversionary channels on the Thames between Chertsey and Teddington with improvements to a number of weirs and locks.

Both Runnymede and the county council are working closely with the Environment Agency which is leading the project management.

Part of the RTS is concerned with making the most of the land close to and adjacent to the three new channels for leisure and recreation, cycleways and pedestrian routes.

We will be working to ensure that optimum use is made of this considerable investment in flood defence.

The RTS will take a number of years to deliver and may not be completed until 2030. In the interim, Runnymede will work with partners and community groups to ensure that we put in place the best possible flood prevention measures. We will also work to ensure that community benefits are maximised through:

- investment in leisure and recreation, some of which may be commercial, and
- investment in pedestrian footways and cycleways ensuring new and safer routes as an alternative to road use.

## Heathrow Airport expansion

Following the pandemic, proposals for a third runway at Heathrow are not likely to go ahead now or at least not in the next 10 years).

New and scaled down proposals for improving Heathrow including access to the airport are likely to emerge.

It is too early to say what these will be in a post pandemic economic environment but the Council is concerned to ensure that:

- ▶ Southern rail access to Heathrow and into

north London remains on the agenda. This is extremely important to our residents and could have significant environmental benefits, providing less reliance on the car for airport journeys as well as easier access to north London.

- ▶ Any new scheme for Heathrow considers the needs of the north Surrey authorities in terms of skills development and jobs, cycleways and footpaths as part of the transport network, improved bus as well as train links and community infrastructure improvements.

## Actions

**1**

Take a lead role in the implementation of the RTS by co-ordinating the Development Consent Order. Seek to ensure that RTS brings with it a range of environmental gains and leisure and recreational opportunities. Continue to work closely with the county council as the major funder and the Environment Agency as project managers.

**2**

Ensure that until the RTS is completed, adequate cover is in place for floods including flood wardens and active community groups.

**3**

Monitor the development of Heathrow to ascertain the potential economic benefits of growth to the Borough whilst evaluating the environmental impact. Reflect our residents' views to government. Heathrow Airports Limited and statutory bodies on important issues such as night flights, noise pollution and surface access.

**4**

Lobby for a much improved Southern Rail access to Heathrow and beyond into north London.

# Tackling inequalities

**There remains a need to tackle the inequalities which are still apparent in specific parts of Runnymede.**

There are five wards which stand out as needing intervention and support:

- ▶ Addlestone South
- ▶ Addlestone North
- ▶ Englefield Green West
- ▶ Egham Hythe
- ▶ Chertsey St Ann's

The type of intervention varies between wards. In some cases, it relates to unemployment and/or low-income households. In others housing, access to educational opportunities and transport or lack of facilities are the issues.

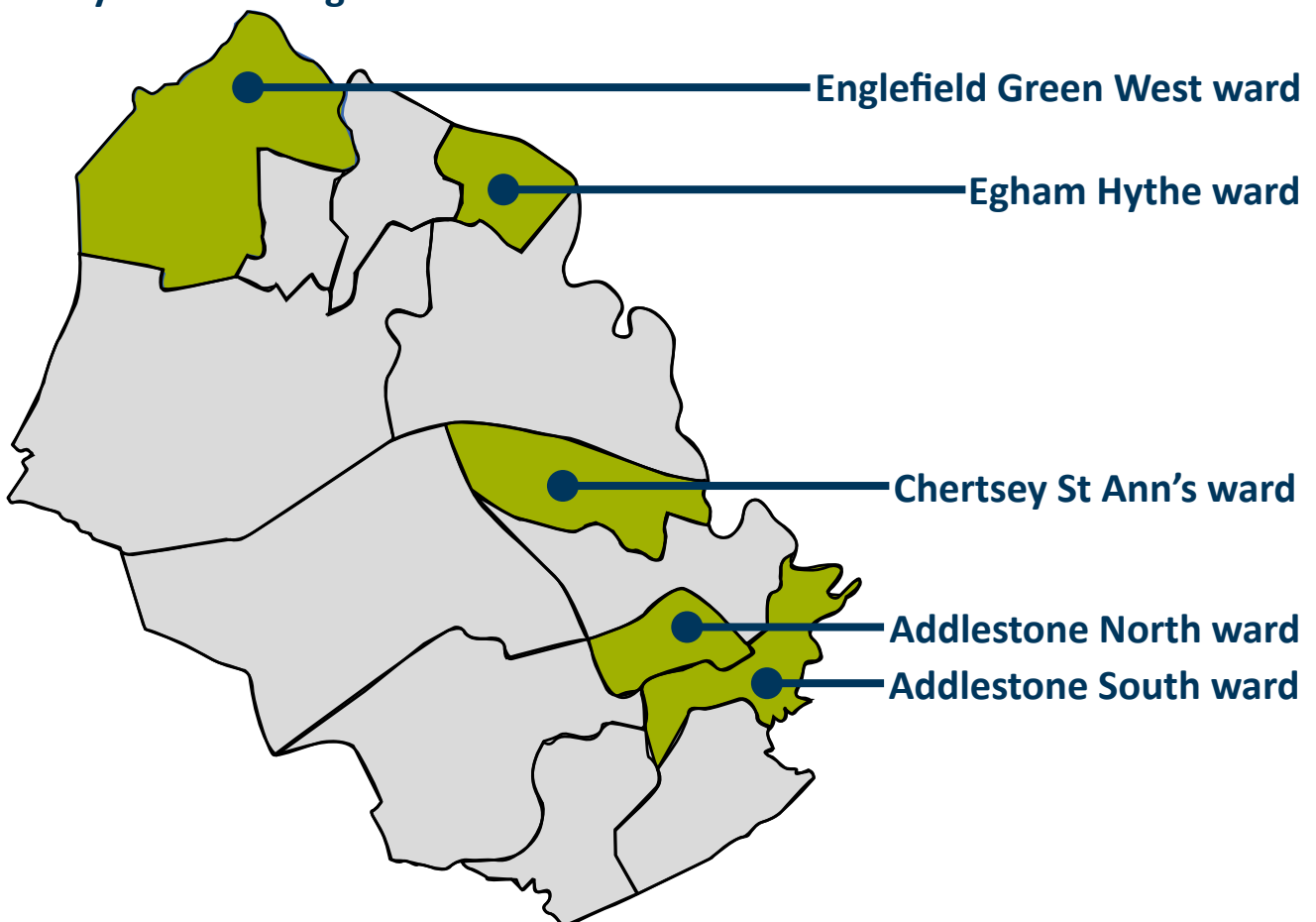
The Council will seek to engage with each community and tailor a package of support which meets local needs.

## Action

**1**

**Undertake an analysis of deprivation in the Borough.**

### Runnymede borough



# Working with other agencies

**During the pandemic, it was evident that by working together across agencies, the Council could provide more powerful results for the community. It should not just be in times of crisis that such a powerful response can be provided.**

The opportunity exists to forge new and more effective alliances going forward by sharing the vision for our community, acknowledging the impact other agencies are or can have going forward and looking for synergies between our individual actions.

A wide range of bodies deliver community initiatives across our Borough and include:

- ▶ Statutory bodies such as Surrey County Council, schools and trusts, the NHS and other local authorities (we have had an integrated Community Services 'offer' with Surrey Heath Borough Council now for over three years).
- ▶ The voluntary sector led and co-ordinated by Voluntary Support North Surrey.
- ▶ The business sector especially through programmes of corporate social responsibility.
- ▶ Faith groups which include Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths.

Whilst officers seek to keep in contact with all of these sectors, there is no single forum where the Council can share its ideas and initiatives and invite these groups to share their work, ideas and thoughts around greater collaboration.

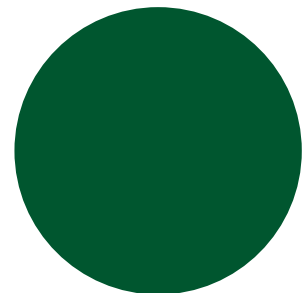
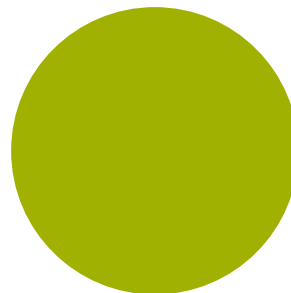
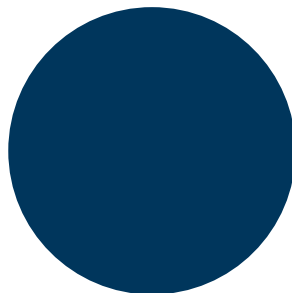
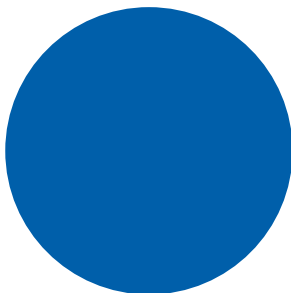
## Actions

**1**

**To invite collaboration on individual projects where there is mutual benefit.**

**2**

**To encourage participation among partners in locally led projects especially where these are centred on community cohesion, tackling deprivation and encouraging inclusiveness.**



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