

# The Parish Digital Communication Revolution:

From social media, virtual events,  
websites to accessibility and strategy.

Mark Tomkins, Founder & Creative Director of Aubergine

Daniel Purchase, Director of Breakthrough Communications

---



FUTURE  
COMMUNITIES 202

# Your **workshop** team today



**Councillor Mark Tomkins**

Founder, Creative Director of Aubergine and Digital Accessibility Champion. Author of NALC's Website Accessibility & Publishing Guide.



**Councillor Daniel Purchase**

Co-Director of Breakthrough Communications, NALC's National Partner for Communications, Data Protection and FOI advice and services.



## What we'll cover today

- The benefits of **creating a meaningful communications strategy**, how to incorporate the mix of digital and traditional communications channels and how it links to the services and priorities of your council
  - We'll be asking - '**where is your council?**' when it comes to creating and implementing an effective communication strategy and making use of your website & social media channels?
  - We'll focus on exploring which digital channels and tools are available to councils, and which to prioritise.
  - **Real world case studies** of where councils have implemented **effective digital communication methods** – including strategy, planning & effective use of website & social channels for better, two-way conversations.
  - Maintaining compliance with accessibility laws, Transparency Code across different platforms.
  - Set your council up for success: **where to start and what to focus on.**
-

# The backdrop: why **good communication** should matter to local councils of all sizes

- Parish and town councils are **increasingly seen as the 'go-to' council** in their area. Communication, underpinned by a meaningful strategy, can support the delivery of your council's aims and objectives as well as its key priorities.
  - Good **communication is also vital** to ensure that **everyone can access information**, access local services and to be able to have their voice heard.
  - As part of your council's overall communications mix, **digital communication has never been so important.**
  - The **last 20 months have shown** that using **social media, websites, virtual events, digital surveys and other forms of digital communication** are all effective ways to get a message out, present information to a wide-range of audiences and to enable your council to build a strategic, two-way conversation inclusively.
-

## Looking back...

- The last **two years** have seen more use of **digital communications** more than **any time in history**
- Councils making tactical use of a range of digital tools and platforms, but often **their use is fragmented and not underpinned by a wider communications and engagement strategy**.
- A more measured, **effective and planned use of digital communications** is needed.

### Some key takeaways:

- Increased community engagement by local councils, including with harder-to-reach groups
- Personal Zoom accounts & creaking I.T. being used for council meetings
- Big & small decisions made without being in the same room
- A greater reliance and appreciation of digital communications

And of course, **the legend that is Jackie**, shining a light on council standards.

---

“you’re on  
mute, John”

“and yes, I  
DO have the  
authority”



# When it comes to communications and engagement, what are the **strategic goals**?

- **Turning communications into a strategic function** of the council helps us consider what is it we wish to communicate, how and when, what our communications objectives and priorities are and how these link to the services, facilities and key priorities of our councils.
  - Residents **rarely distinguish between different tiers** of local government, so it's important we communicate what we do, how we do it, how to access it **and** what others do.
  - Helps your council **communicate more effectively with residents, businesses and the wider community** and impacts **how the council is seen and hear**.
  - The **more accessible the communication** method, the more people it reaches.
  - **So, how do we create a communication and engagement strategy for our council?**
  - **What are the digital communication methods available to us?**
-

# Creating (and implementing) an effective communication and engagement strategy

1. At the outset, consider **what you're trying to achieve** and the **approach you will take**
  2. Objectively **review the ways** in which your council currently communicates
  3. Consider your council's **key priorities, aims and objectives**, and create **SMART communication objectives**
  4. Consider the **different audiences** you wish to engage with, the **messages you wish to communicate** to each audience, and the language and tone you use
  5. Now consider which **communications channels** you will use. Regardless of your council's size and capacity, it's important to make use of both **digital AND non-digital communications channels**
  6. Put together a **resource-appropriate plan** to implement the strategy, and consider how you will measure success
  7. **Review, review, review.**
-

## Case studies: implementing council-focused communication and engagement strategies

- Breakthrough Communications are experienced at leading parish and town councils through a tried and tested eight-step process to create, develop and get buy-in for a communications and engagement strategy.
- We've created and implemented such strategies in small and large councils alike, including in Ware and Bletchley & Fenny Stratford.
- In both of these councils we sought input from Members using anonymous survey tools and virtual workshops, worked with officers to develop the strategy and guided them on how to effectively implement the strategy, in the context of the services each council provides.

"It's been invaluable to have communications support from an organisation that knows and understands the sector so well."

*Delia Shephard, Clerk,  
Bletchley & Fenny Stratford Town Council*

"Good understanding and delivery against the brief with informative ideas on how we could move forward, would work with again and recommend to others."

*Terry Philpott, Clerk,  
Ware Town Council*

# Digital Communication methods

## Websites

- September 2020 saw the introduction of accessibility publishing laws required for all UK public bodies to meet – **and it couldn't have come at a better time.**
  - **WCAG2.1AA standard** required.
  - People with disabilities during the various lockdowns – **1 in 5 people in every community** has a disability of one form or another.
  - Content & **information** being accessible and **without barriers** was and is vital. As well as being law.
  - Accessibility isn't just about the technical stuff
  - **Language** used, **where you communicate** all play their part to **reduce communication** barriers and open up that two-way conversation
-

# Digital Communication **methods**

## Websites

- An accessible website (and not one that provide accessibility through a plugin!)
  - An accessibility checking process
  - A language & comprehension checking process
  - A Transparency Code checking process
  - A definition of the website's purpose according to your communication strategy/plan
-

# Digital Communication **methods**

## Websites – content strategy

- Not using a website as a dumping ground and chucking everything on it in the hope of meeting regulation
  - For regulatory content & messaging – what's got to be published as a public body.
  - Community-oriented content & messaging – what you want to publish- community support, information and awareness (news, events and local info).
  - Detail and content-rich information. Social media channels should be used to drive users **TO** the website for a fuller experience (short, excerpted version of the message + a link to the page on the website used to increase awareness, conversation and engagement)
  - A resource centre – a single point of contact and destination for all council information and services.
-

# Digital Communication **methods**

## Websites – tips

- Using plugins and those widgets to meet your accessibility is not compliant. Overlays, as they are known, actually create a greater accessibility problem for those with disabilities.
- Title your Word documents exactly what they are so that when you save the file as an accessible PDF and add it to your website, the link text will also be accessible. Using a plain English naming culture for files will also help you when you are searching for them!

e.g 'Your Parish Council Minutes November 2021.pdf' tells the user what the file is, whereas 'Minutes-011121-final\_v2.pdf' does not..

*An extra tip* tell the user what the file type is and how big the file is in the title:

E.g 'Your Parish Council Minutes November 2021 (PDF 672kb).pdf'

---

## Case Study: **Leighton Linslade Town Council**

### Starting point

The website **pre-2018** was a 5+ year old Drupal website with **no accessibility compliance**, very **little Transparency Code compliance** and was **not mobile friendly**.

The Council knew that the website was both a **powerful and necessary communication tool**, both in terms of the regulatory information as well as the **community messaging, future plans and initiatives** that go with a town of c40,000 residents.

Although the **existing website was out of date** in terms of **capability** and had some unresolvable **technical issues**, the council maintained its use to the best degree within the restrictions of the current website's capabilities, but it was time consuming and not as effective as the council wished.

---



# LEIGHTON-LINSLADE TOWN COUNCIL

Sign up to the About Town Newsletter  
Be the first to read about Town-wide  
activities and plans.

Subscribe

Welcome to Leighton-Linslade, a vibrant, growing Bedfordshire town with a fascinating past, lots happening now and exciting plans for the future. We've got so much to talk about! All our pages can be accessed from the menu bar at the top of this page – but you can also view our most popular pages by clicking the buttons below.

CONTACT US

ASTRAL PARK

TACTIC

PARKS/OPEN SPACES

EVENTS

MARKET

MEETINGS

COUNCILLORS

## LATEST NEWS

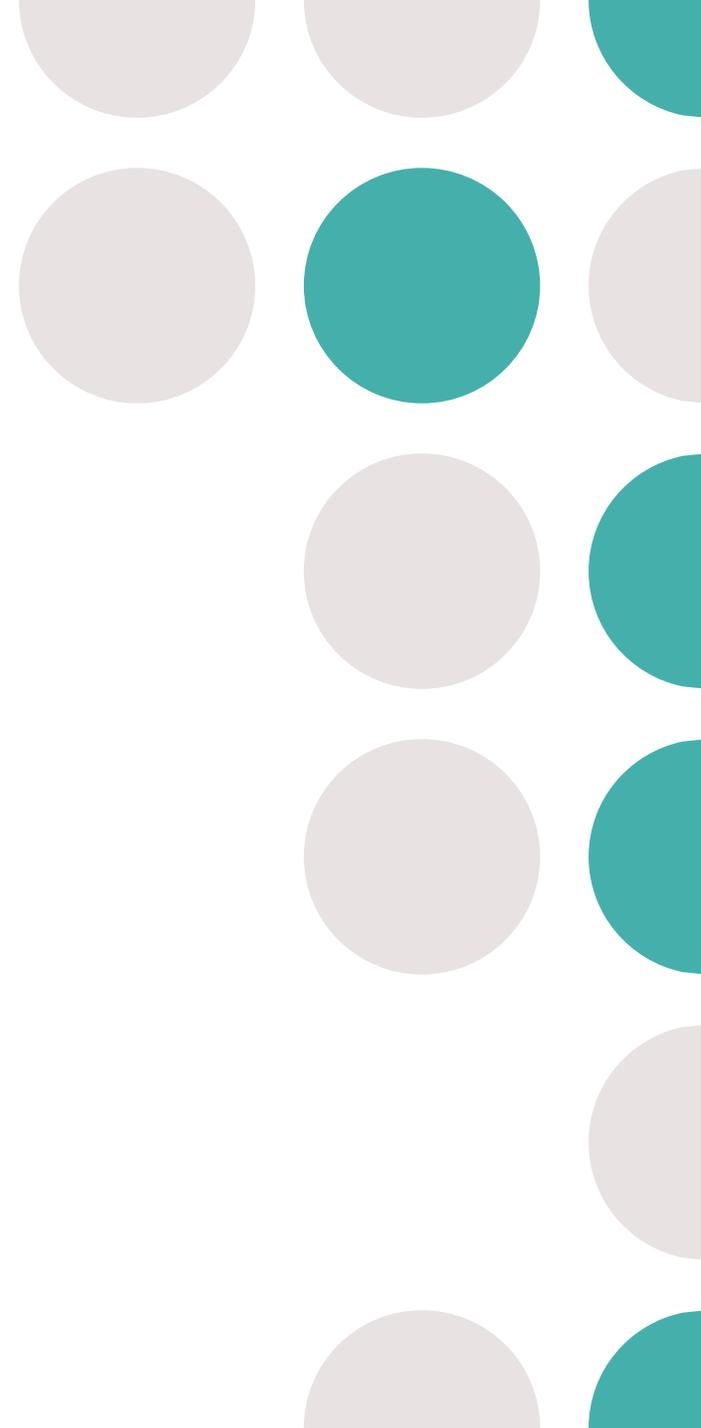
We are now accepting applications for general and start up grants, up to £500 available – are you eligible?



READ OUR LATEST  
NEWSLETTER



Tweets by @LLTCNews



## **Case Study: Leighton Linslade Town Council**

This investment in a communication tool, such as a new website, was a key part in a greater overall communications strategy, with a website being one of the central mechanisms in that infrastructure.

Key elements in a new website specification were identified as:

- Better, more editable website admin system, preferably Wordpress
  - Ease of use – both administration and end-user
  - Must meet WCAG 2.1AA accessibility compliance
  - Better, more responsive design and layout suitable for all types of devices
  - Cleaner design
  - Hosted on a secure UK-based server and software updated regularly
  - A low technical knowledge requirement for the Council communication team
  - Must have longevity and an element of future-proofing built in.
-

## Case Study: **Leighton Linslade Town Council**

### We recorded:

- Typically processes & ways of working
  - Communication challenges
  - Desired ways of working
  - Concerns
  - Visions
  - Desired outcome – fast forward to 6 months from now, what do you have?
-

## **Case Study: Leighton Linslade Town Council**

Two sessions following this process captured enough information to write the specification and quotation followed by:

- Defined the design approach that met the Council style guide whilst met accessibility criteria
  - Defined the website administration processes; what, when, who
  - Created a sitemap
  - Created a website content curation plan alongside an overall communication plan
  - Identified gaps in content + planned approach
  - Identified what the launch content and messaging would be + a schedule of future known topics
  - Identified the points of contact on the site to allow for conversation with users where was information-only.
-

## **Case Study: Leighton Linslade Town Council**

In addition we provided:

- Provided guidance on best practice of using the website as the final destination of the fullest example of a piece of information and to use social media and newsletters with excerpts to drive users to the website for the complete experience.
  - Reviewed Google Analytical data to establish patterns and trends from the current users
  - Development & site construction
  - Website accessibility training for all staff & website administrators
  - Review of site by all stakeholders and test user groups
  - Launch + scheduling of accessibility checking (after every new page/edit with browser checker and every 3 months with full scan)
  - Analytics review every 3 months
-

## Case Study: **Leighton Linslade Town Council**

What was delivered:

- A fully accessible WCAG 2.1AA compliant Wordpress-based website
  - Built with many pre-defined page templates that required no coding knowledge so that the Council could easily add new content and keep the website both fresh and compliant without specialist knowledge on a day to day basis.
  - Whilst the daily operation of the website is run by the Council communications team, they are fully supported by Aubergine, both in terms of the software and hosting – which reduces the burden of knowledge on the Council but also from a feasibility and digital communication guidance role.
  - Additionally, the Council's communication team are supported with guidance on best practice accessibility tips – from help with how to handle images and files through to style and on-page accessibility techniques as well future ways to make use of the investment in the communications platform.
-

## **Case Study: Leighton Linslade Town Council**

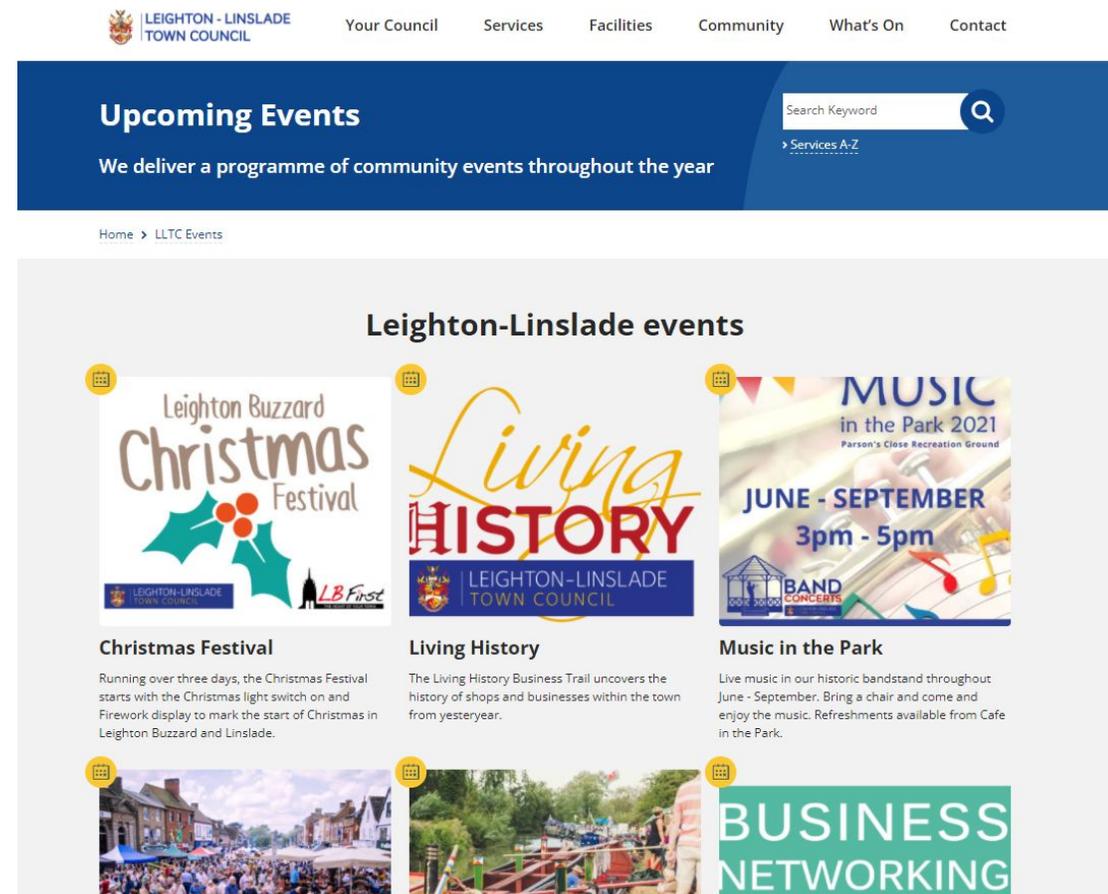
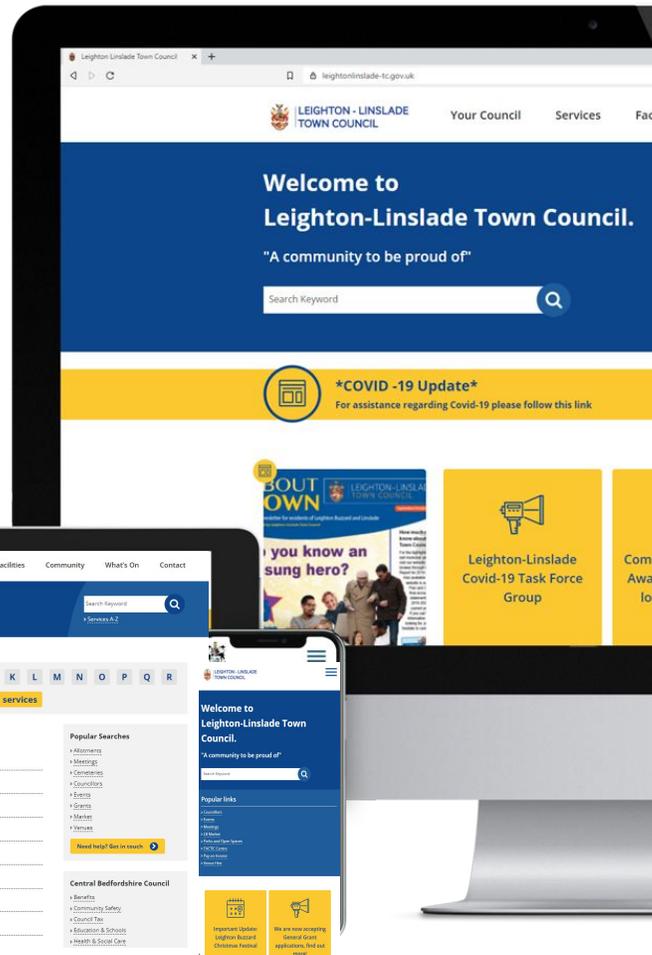
### **Wider communications**

- The website provides the platform for users to engage with the Council, find out information relating to the town and gain access to further communication channels.
- This website now forms one of the central parts in the Leighton Linslade Town Council overall communication strategy and stands as a point of excellence for town and parish Councils to achieve both in terms of compliance as well as communication reach.

### **Awarded**

- Leighton-Linlade Town Council have gone on to win the Local Council Scheme Gold Award, which was in part, due to the Council being able to evidence all 52 criteria by way of links to the relevant sections of its website thereby demonstrating communications being at the heart of many aspects of achieving this high-level recognition.
-

# Case Study: Leighton Linslade Town Council



# Digital Communication **methods**

## Digital / e-newsletters

- **If you're producing a digital version of your council's printed newsletter**, you must meet accessibility requirements. It must be an accessible PDF.
    - If the newsletter is produced in Word, run the inbuilt accessibility checker before saving as a PDF.
    - If the newsletter is produced in a design application, it is unlikely to be accessible.
    - You may instead need to publish pages & posts on your website for each article and link from social channels to those pages.
    - Write an excerpt for each article and post that, with a link to the website page on the social channel.
  - **If you use a professional e-newsletter service, such as Mailchimp**, don't simply email out an attachment PDF as it's really hard for a disabled person to experience.
    - Ensure you use the software's built-in tools to make content as accessible as possible, for example ensuring images have alt-descriptions and there's a plain text version of your email.
    - Ensure GDPR compliance of the software tool you're using.
-

# Council eNewsletters

## Setup and GDPR compliance, training and best practice support for Clerks & Officers

- Breakthrough Communications setup eNewsletter systems for councils, making sure they are GDPR and PECR compliant, and provide training and best practice support to help ensure their success

### Events and Activities



#### **Volunteer with QPCC this festive season**

We are hosting several events in the coming weeks to promote social inclusion and spread the festive cheer. If you can help us run these event by volunteering for an hour or so, please email [Shuwanna](mailto:Shuwanna) or call **020 8960 5644** to get

involved.

- **Saturday 4th December, Winter Festival**
- **Saturday 4th December, Community Clean up: Festive edition**
- **Monday 6th to Thursday 9th December, Santa Truck**
- **Wednesday 8th December, Festive Community Lunch**



### **Christmas Fayre this weekend!!**



Just a reminder that we will be holding our Billingshurst Christmas Fayre this Saturday 4 December at the Billingshurst Centre in Roman Way. RH14 9QW

Santa will be in attendance in his grotto, there will be a raffle, tombola, refreshments and loads of stalls to browse with plenty of ideas for Christmas gifts!

We really look forward to welcoming you on Saturday 🎅

# Digital Communication **methods**

## **Emailed or published newsletters – tip**

It's worth noting...

Printed newsletters, parish and town magazine are great ways to communicate but it's important to always remember that whatever you publish in those pieces, the information is also available either on your website (in an accessible form) or can be requested in alternative formats, such as Braille, large print or a digital text file that can be used by someone who has sight loss or similar disabilities.

---



# Digital Communication **methods**

## Social Media

- Social media enables councils to reach parts of your community that might not otherwise engage (or even be aware of) the council and its work
  - Great way of humanising the council, by showing people who we are, what we do, how we do it - all in a visual, engaging - and accessible - way
  - Plenty of free tools available to help you create engaging content, schedule your posts, manage comments and messages, and more
  - Social media, as with websites, are great platforms to use pre-recorded or live video to convey everything from seasonal greetings to complex and technical subject matters
  - Integrate social media with your website and e-Newsletter, if you have one
  - Accessibility matters! Consider image alt-tags, captions on videos, and more.
-

# Digital Communication **methods**

## Social Media - strategy, content and language/tone

- Consider your **approach to social media** as a council and what you're trying to achieve. Ask yourself:
    - What **platforms** should we use?
    - Should we allow **messages to be sent to the council**? What do we do about **comments**?
    - What are the **messages** we're seeking to convey? What **questions** do we want to ask?
    - What kind of **content** should we put on social media and **how often** should we post?
    - What do **councils like ours** do well on social media?
  - Consider the **language, tone and mix of content**:
    - Social media is usually **chatty in tone**, and informal. Councils should consider what their '**digital voice**' sounds like and how they want to come across - and how they wish to be perceived.
    - Create a **content strategy** that includes: a mix of topical and 'evergreen' content, content that humanises, showcases the work of the council, useful, informative and engaging
-

# Digital Communication **methods**

## Digital Surveys and Consultations

- Surveys and consultations are great ways to take the pulse of the community, or a segment of it, either on a wide-ranging set of issues or for something far more specific
  - Great way to seek specific feedback on a service or area of priority for the council
  - Useful way to build reputation and standing of the council
  - Digital surveys and consultations should, where possible and practicable, sit alongside paper versions to ensure maximum uptake
  - Digital survey tools such as [typeform.com](https://www.typeform.com) are WCAG2.1AA compliant, ensuring that your surveys are as accessible as possible
-

# Case Study: Broadstairs & St Peter's Town Council

**Broadstairs & St Peter's Town Council**  
Broadstairs & St Peter's Town Council Neighbourhood Plan  
Community Survey

Please answer as many questions as you feel able to give responses to. Feel free to continue your answers on separate sheets of paper. If you have any questions about the survey, please call the council on 01843 868718 or email the council at [bsptc@broadstairs.gov.uk](mailto:bsptc@broadstairs.gov.uk).

**Take survey now** press Enter ↵

**Broadstairs & St Peter's Town Council**  
Pierremont Hall, Broadstairs, Kent, CT10 1JX

**Dear Resident,**

Broadstairs & St Peter's was the first Town Council in Thanet to get a Neighbourhood Plan to referendum stage and we have been the trailblazers in the local area regarding all things Neighbourhood Planning ever since.

To this end, we are now launching a Community Survey to help form the basis for the next edition of the Neighbourhood Plan.

**The Neighbourhood Plan is all about the future of our community. The council wants to understand what matters most to you, our residents, as we develop our vision for the future of Broadstairs & St Peter's. We are looking to establish projects for the future of our town, identify issues and work out the most appropriate areas to prioritise funds.**

If voted for, the Neighbourhood Plan will help develop a shared vision for our community and will also help us address issues about our local area and its future.

Please complete the enclosed survey, and return it to us at the address below. You can also complete the survey online at [www.broadstairs.gov.uk](http://www.broadstairs.gov.uk).

If you have any questions about the survey, please call the council on 01843 868718 or email the council at [bsptc@broadstairs.gov.uk](mailto:bsptc@broadstairs.gov.uk).

Thank you for taking the time to help shape the future of our community.

Best wishes,  
**Robert W. Bayford**  
Councillor Robert W. Bayford  
Chairman of the Neighbourhood Plan Sub-Committee  
Broadstairs & St Peter's Town Council

Please send back your completed survey to:  
**Broadstairs & St Peter's Town Council,**  
Pierremont Hall, Broadstairs, Kent, CT10 1JX

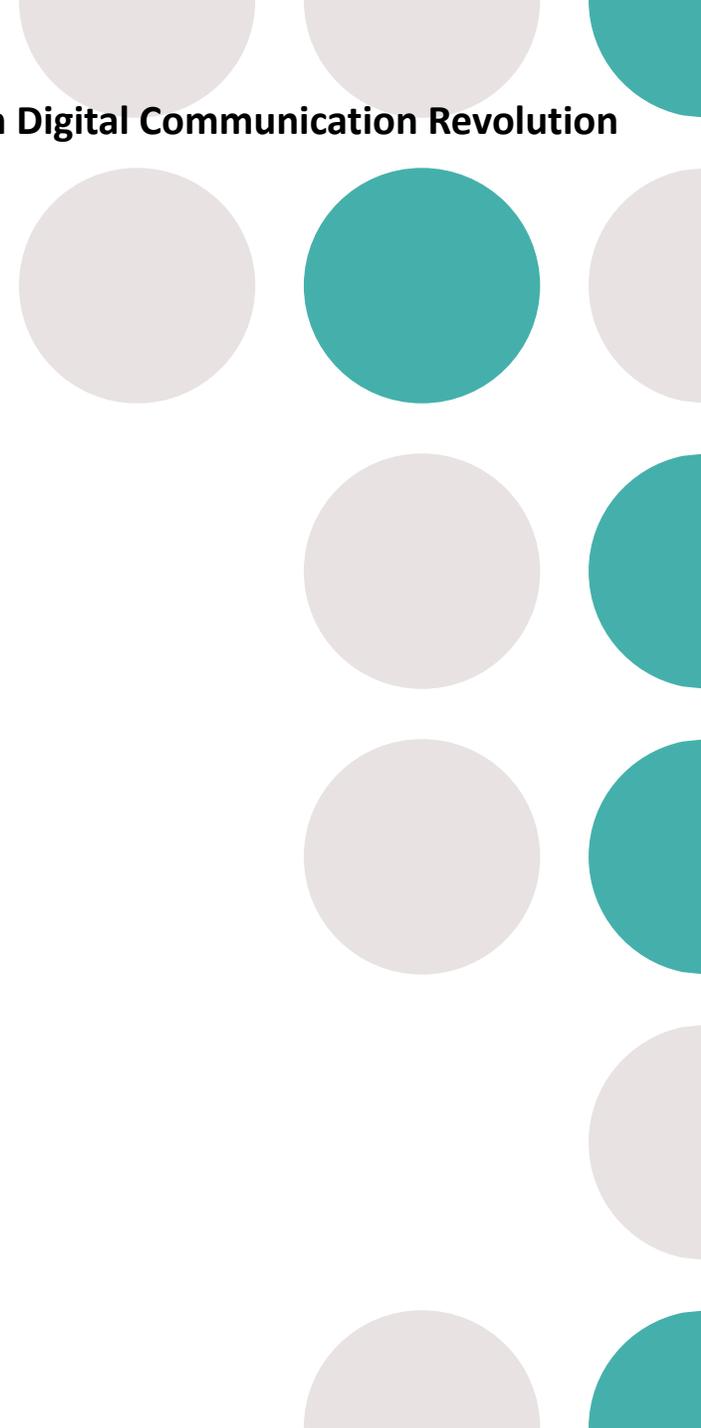
You can also complete the survey online by visiting the town council's website at [www.broadstairs.gov.uk](http://www.broadstairs.gov.uk). The survey is anonymous. All responses will be processed securely and in a confidential manner by Broadstairs & St Peter's Town Council and its contractors, in accordance with the council's privacy policy, a copy of which can be viewed on the Town Council's website.

**Broadstairs & St Peter's Town Council**  
Pierremont Hall, Broadstairs, Kent, CT10 1JX

## **Case Study: Broadstairs & St Peter's Town Council**

**Support councils to get response from a wide-range of voices in the community**

- Print and digital versions of surveys and consultations is important, and using tools such as QR codes helps link the two together effectively
- Breakthrough Communications use advanced geo-targeting on social media platforms to ensure councils get response from a wide range of demographics



# Case Study: Billingshurst Parish Council



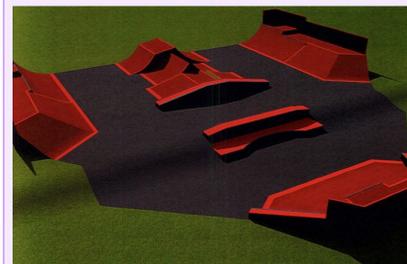
## Billingshurst Parish Council Skate Park Consultation

a year ago · 8.1K views

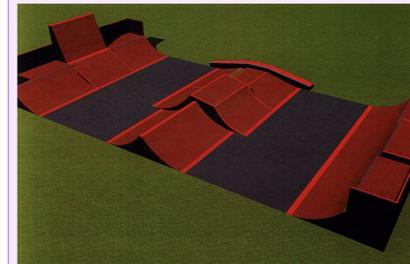
  65

1 → There are six draft designs. Please take a look at each one and select the design you like the most. \*

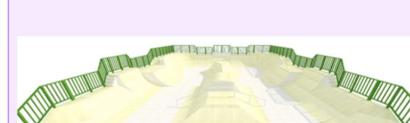
If you'd like to see larger photos, please click here.



**A** Design A



**B** Design B



# Digital Communication **methods**

## **Apps**

- Exactly the same accessibility requirements as a website – but often ignored
- Use to enhance the heavy lifting of the website and make them more community-oriented communication and engagement – Trails, Events, News etc.
- Great for continued engagement through push notifications as people will more likely keep the app and check it over visiting a website unless you send them there from your social channel.

## **Tips & guidance**

- Lots of app are not accessible as they pre-date the requirement -get them checked
  - Plan the purpose of the enhanced engagement – what do you (the council) want out of the app?
  - Don't have one just because.
-

# Digital Communication methods

## Virtual Engagement Events

- The pandemic has transformed how society communicates, and people across almost all demographics are now used to using tools such as Zoom, Teams, FaceTime and WhatsApp video chat to interact
- Breakthrough Communications supports councils to take this to the next level, including facilitating, promoting and hosting virtual engagement events and meetings, held on Zoom but also live-streamed to social media platforms



Neighbourhood Plan engagement event

37 weeks ago · 976 views



Broadstairs & St Peter's Neighbour Plan: your views and ideas

37 weeks ago · 266 views



Neighbourhood Plan consultation update

40 weeks ago · 1.1K views



Broadstairs & St Peter's Neighbourhood Plan Update

40 weeks ago · 485 views



## Final remarks: website accessibility

There have been a few teething problems with the adoption of website accessibility - something new always does, but...

- ✓ Lots of **bright sparks** and **flashes of the future**
  - ✓ **Brilliant adoption of technology** and practices that were scarcely used before the pandemic
  - ✓ **Around 50% of councils have addressed website accessibility** and have both a compliant website and a good understand of the requirement.
  - ✓ Now is the time to take what we've learned and really **use digital communications** in a **planned and strategic way** to minimise problems and **maximise benefit**.
-