

Towns
Fund^

ENGAGING WITH BUSINESSES

Nine practical ideas for towns, whether drafting TIPs, developing business cases or delivering projects (and beyond)

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WHY ENGAGE WITH BUSINESSES?

From sole traders to multinationals, businesses are the lifeblood of a community. While some may have a long history in your town, others may be relative newcomers to the area. They can be contributors to the Towns Fund, or beneficiaries, as it seeks to galvanise local economies. Businesses should be at the heart of shaping and delivering Town Investment Plans (TIPs).

Business engagement goes beyond 'bricks and mortar'. Businesses consist of local people who are likely to be residents of your town or neighbouring communities. While it is important to seek the views of business leaders who can speak on behalf of their organisations, take opportunities to engage with the workforce too as this could provide insightful feedback on issues such as training and transport.

WHAT MHCLG'S FURTHER GUIDANCE SAYS

TIPs should reflect local priorities and be co-designed with input from local businesses and communities. Town Deal Boards should include local business representation and TIPs should show clear evidence of buy-in from local businesses and a commitment to continuing engagement in future. The strength of past and ongoing engagement, consultation and collaboration with businesses in the town is one of the review criteria for TIPs set out in Annex C of the MHCLG's Further Guidance.



WHEN TO ENGAGE WITH BUSINESSES?

ENGAGE EARLY, ENGAGE OFTEN

The earlier you engage with local businesses the better. Early engagement gives businesses the chance to shape your town's vision and strategy as well as highlighting potential match funding opportunities. However, engagement should not once your TIP is submitted. Continue the conversation by updating businesses on progress and seek their input through business case development and the delivery of projects.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

Building long-lasting local business networks will not only aid delivery of the TIP, it will provide a platform for future initiatives to benefit your town.

BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT



TIP

Businesses contribute to vision and strategy, and identify match funding opportunities



DETAILED PROJECTS & BUSINESS CASES

Businesses input to evidence base for business cases and provide project specific feedback



PROJECTS COMMENCE

Businesses help to deliver projects and share updates with their employees, customers and suppliers



CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT

Businesses offer feedback on project delivery and provide data to inform KPI reporting



9 PRACTICAL IDEAS

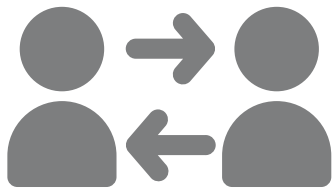


- 1** Collaboration with business organisations
- 2** Building an ambassador network
- 3** Driving advocacy
- 4** Customer communication
- 5** Cluster conversations
- 6** Employee engagement
- 7** Leveraging local media
- 8** Working with supply chains
- 9** Telling your story to businesses

1

COLLABORATION WITH BUSINESS ORGANISATIONS

Business organisations can play a role in representing their members' views, and offer access to communications channels which enable you to reach large numbers of local businesses. Private sector representatives on your Town Deal Board are likely to be members of one or more of these groups and may help you identify options and opportunities to engage with.



WHO'S WHO OF BUSINESS ORGANISATIONS

The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) represents smaller UK businesses and has regional representatives who will have local knowledge of your town.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) represents 190,000 businesses, employing around a third of the UK workforce. The CBI has 10 offices across England.

Chambers of Commerce supports and connects companies, often championing the communities in which they operate.

Business in the Community is a business-led membership organisation dedicated to responsible business and can offer support to towns seeking investment through the Towns Fund.

Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) may already be represented on your Town Deal Board and can provide an effective bridge between the public and private sector in your town.

WAYS TO ENGAGE WITH BUSINESS ORGANISATIONS

Business organisations hold regular face-to-face or virtual meetings attended by members. Securing a spot on their agenda will give you an opportunity to speak directly to a broad cross-section of local business.

Digital and print newsletters provide members with regular updates on matters of interest to the business community. Ask them to feature your TIP in the next edition.

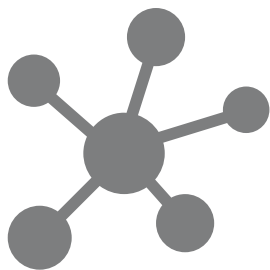
Business organisations regularly survey members. They might consider including questions on investment priorities for example, gathering valuable evidence for your TIP or business cases.

Their social media channels will have hyperlocal business followings, so tag them in your posts and ask them to share your latest updates.

2

BUILDING AN AMBASSADOR NETWORK

You might want to consider creating a business network of your own. An 'ambassador network' brings together representatives from local businesses in an informal group committed to promoting the interests of the town.



WHAT THEY DO

Ambassador networks can share valuable intelligence and information. This should be a two-way process in which you provide updates and members can raise issues of their own.

They provide a forum for feedback on emerging plans and projects under development, acting as a focus group through which you can gather a cross-section of views from local businesses.

Ambassador networks can also be useful in encouraging the business community to speak with one voice. By providing key facts and talking points about the Towns Fund you can demonstrate that your improvement projects have buy-in.

HOW TO SET ONE UP

Work with colleagues to come up with a short-list of local businesses who are passionate about your town, represent key sectors in the local economy, and are respected in the business community and beyond.

Draft terms of reference setting out what the ambassador network's role will be and what commitment you require from members (for example, how often will you meet).

Find a local venue (this could be one of the businesses on your shortlist) willing to host your first meeting, or use an app such as Zoom if restrictions on public meetings are in place.

Put together an agenda for your first meeting, including a presentation on your TIP. This could be delivered by the Chair of your Town Deal Board.

3 DRIVING ADVOCACY

By engaging the business community, ambassadors from within your network may be encouraged to advocate for your TIP and key town improvement projects. Advocates could promote the TIP among the business community and to members of the public.

QUOTES

Including quotes from a third party in your press releases increases credibility and demonstrates buy-in for your TIP or individual project. The backing of a high-profile (or well regarded) local business helps to build momentum by showing the business community is behind your plans.

VOX POPS

You can take this a step further by producing short videos (vox pops) featuring local businesses talking about their aspirations for the town. These can be shared with local media, through your own digital channels and those of contributors.

INFLUENCERS

Supportive business leaders can be invited to share a platform with the council at events (face-to-face or virtual) when speaking about the Towns Fund. The perspective they provide will serve to make the topic more engaging for other businesses, further building buy-in to your TIP and its projects.

CLUSTER CONVERSATIONS

Extend the offer of a bespoke presentation to businesses within 'clusters' (such as industrial parks, sectors or trade associations). This provides you with an opportunity to share your message with employees and business leaders and grows your ambassador network with the backing and support of existing advocates.

CASE STUDIES

Engaged local businesses can also be encouraged to feature in case studies to support your TIP submission or demonstrate the value of individual projects. These can be shared with local media and also provide engaging content for dedicated Towns Fund website pages.

4

CUSTOMER COMMUNICATION

Engaging with businesses has the potential to extend the reach of your engagement by providing opportunities to communicate with their customers, either digitally or face-to-face. For example, a local shopping centre, football club or cinema will enjoy significant footfall under normal circumstances, affording you considerably more opportunities to engage.

MATERIALS DISTRIBUTION

Displaying materials on prominent sites in your town could raise awareness of your TIP and the projects it will deliver. Similarly, including information in e-newsletters or customer-facing websites could get your message in front of a new audience.

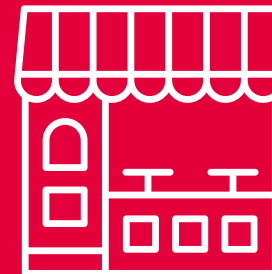
TRUSTED SOURCES

By partnering with familiar, trusted sources you also increase the likelihood of your message being read rather than deleted, ignored or ending up in a junk file.

Think about smaller businesses who may have high levels of trust in communities, such as local shops, pubs and restaurants. Remember, 96% of all businesses in the UK are micro-businesses (0-9 employees).

FEEDBACK

Always ask for feedback. You could encourage direct feedback to an email inbox, ask people to Tweet with a dedicated hashtag, signpost readers to an online form or the MyTown website, provide a freepost address – or use a combination of all of these. This feedback could be included in your TIP submission as evidence of outreach and engagement with business communities.



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5 CLUSTER CONVERSATIONS

Identifying clusters in your town can provide a potential route to engagement. This could be companies working in the same sector or businesses located close to each other, for example on an industrial estate or business park.



This presents opportunities to meet with several businesses at once and means you can tailor your content to their area of interest – such as tourism numbers or investment in SMEs. Some sectors may already have active member groups (such as hoteliers' associations in towns with a strong visitor economy) which provide opportunities for you to speak at meetings or provide content to newsletters, social media channels, or questionnaires via their member databases.

This could be particularly useful when developing business cases and delivering projects, enabling you to explore specific issues such

as transport access to an area or availability of skills training in a particular sector.

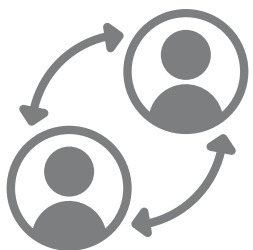
Provide bespoke content when presenting to clusters, and tailor your message to their interests, whether that is driven by location or area of specialism.

Taking the cluster approach could also include considering future clusters which could be formed through delivery of the projects in the TIP. You could think about forming shadow cluster groups in these cases, building networks even before the physical infrastructure is in place.

6

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

When engaging with businesses you are likely to find yourself liaising mostly with the senior team. Don't overlook the opportunity to find out what employees think too. Local firms may be willing to share details of the Town Deal with their workforce using internal communications tools such as intranets, newsletters and noticeboards.



You could explore opportunities to display information about the Towns Fund in reception or breakout areas, providing feedback cards and drop-boxes to capture comments.

Bespoke forums and drop-in events – not every business will proactively share the info provided. Make it as simple and easy for them as you can. Remember they are time-poor: time is money. Work with in-house teams and provide them with a reason to engage – they will probably welcome interesting content to share with their colleagues.

7

LEVERAGING LOCAL MEDIA

The power of the local media should not be underestimated. They continue to provide key updates to local business communities and residents and can be leveraged to tell your story.



1. Find existing links within your organisation. Harness the relationships employed by your communications team.
2. Consider your Call to Action (CTA). You could request feedback on your TIP proposals or promote attendance at an event.
3. Make your story interesting. Paint a picture of what the Town Deal is trying to achieve, taking your lead from the vision set out in your TIP. Be sure to highlight the total amount of funding sought as this will make for an attention-grabbing headline.
4. Harness the power of the press. Local papers often run regular breakfast meetings or networking events (currently online) which could provide a platform to raise awareness of the Town Deal.
5. Work collaboratively to run a local campaign. Consider #BacktheBid type campaigns to galvanise interest and support.
6. Get to know the paper's commercial team. Sometimes, a well-placed advert in a local paper or on a news website will be enough to spread your message and encourage people to get involved.
7. Local online news sites now lead with video content, consider creating short clips and sharing them with news sites to encourage coverage of your TIP. When working with the press use high-resolution images, They will not publish low-res pictures, wasting your time and theirs.
8. Don't forget digital in your media campaigns. News sites look for 'quick wins' that can be readily translated into digestible content. They will often turn their attention to social media for comment and content.
9. Proactively engage with regional broadcast teams. If you're running an event to encourage interest in your TIP, consider inviting the media. Let them film some of the event or ensure that there are several representatives prepared to appear in front of the camera for an interview – this provides an ideal time to push your CTA.

8

WORKING WITH SUPPLY CHAINS

An engaged supply chain can be a key contributor to success, particularly in Towns with one major employer or a dominant cluster.



SUPPLIER NETWORKS

Remember, many of the businesses within your Town may be suppliers to other businesses in and around the area. Engage them early to understand the challenges they face and utilise their feedback as part of the TIP or to build a business case. Their personal feedback will add evidence of engagement and a human face to the financials.

EVENTS

Consider working with businesses to run supplier events, this will provide you access to their supplier database and potentially enhance your ambassador network. This provides you with an opportunity to share your plans with the supply chain (such events can be held over digital channels in the immediate future).

FEEDBACK

Create a mechanism to receive feedback from the supply chain of major (or minor businesses). Understand what the supply chain would like to see in the TIP, some of these businesses may be looking to relocate or expand, provide them a reason to invest (financially and emotionally) in your Town.

LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

Be in it for the long term. Engagement doesn't end once the TIP has been submitted, continue to ask for feedback on your plans and take suppliers along on the journey.

9

TELLING YOUR STORY TO BUSINESSES

Underpinning the previous eight ideas is your ability to tell the story of your TIP and the projects it comprises in a way that engages local businesses and provides them a reason to advocate for success.



DEMONSTRATE VALUE

Show how the TIP addresses challenges facing businesses in your town, and the benefits each project will bring to the business community (for example, by creating a more skilled workforce). Be honest about the current situation but speak positively about how the TIP will make a real difference.



LOOK BEYOND THE NUMBERS

Large numbers can help generate headlines (see #7) but it is also important to tell the human story. What will your TIP do for the prospects of young people in the town? How will it help create fertile ground for the next generation of local entrepreneurs? By telling the human story you can speak to hearts as well as heads, turning acceptance into advocacy.



PROVIDE REASONS TO STAY AND GROW

Inward investment from outside your town may be an important facet of your TIP but don't overlook the importance of existing businesses. When presenting your plan to local businesses make sure you give them reasons to stay and grow.



Visit the [Town's Fund website](#) for more stakeholder engagement resources