Report from the Community Engagement Task and Finish Forum

Prepared for: Full Council Meeting April 2026

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SUMMARY

This report summarises the findings of the Community Engagement Task and Finish Forum (TAFF). It outlines the TAFF's conclusions and proposes a series of recommendations to strengthen Exmouth Town Council's approach to community engagement, improve communication with residents, and ensure that engagement activity is proactive, inclusive, and aligned with the Council's strategic priorities.

BACKGROUND

The Community Engagement TAFF was established in September 2025 to review the Town Council's existing Community Engagement Policy, identify gaps in current practice, and develop a practical, deliverable plan for improving communication and engagement with residents, community groups, and stakeholders across Exmouth.

At the first meeting on 30 September 2025, members identified several early challenges:

- The Community Organisations Liaison Panel (COLP) was no longer fulfilling its intended purpose.
- Engagement activity has largely focused on providing information rather than inviting residents' views or involving them meaningfully in decision-making.
- There was a need for community mapping to understand which groups were being reached and where gaps existed.
- The Council lacks officer time for meaningful community engagement, limiting capacity for development.
- Residents often misunderstood the roles of the three councils (DCC, EDDC, ETC), leading to confusion and misplaced expectations.
- Youth engagement was inconsistent, and previous attempts at a Youth Council had not been sustained.
- Achieving Quality Council Gold Status would require a stronger, more structured approach to engagement.

The TAFF met four times between September 2025 and January 2026. Its work was informed by:

- The Council's Community Engagement Policy
- A mapping exercise of community groups, networks, and identifiable communities
- A presentation from Devon Development Education (DDE)
- Discussion of existing and desired engagement methods
- Consideration of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)
- Internal communication processes and councillor roles

- A working document outlining groups in Exmouth and potential engagement opportunities

Across all meetings, members emphasised the need for a more structured, proactive, and measurable approach to engagement, supported by clear accountability and improved internal communication.

EVIDENCE GATHERING AND KEY FINDINGS

1. Exmouth's Community Landscape

The TAFF identified a wide range of community groups, networks, and identifiable communities, including:

- Cultural and faith groups
- Schools, PTAs, and youth organisations
- Sports clubs, hobby groups, and arts organisations
- Charities, CICs, and voluntary groups
- Older people, digitally excluded residents, and care home communities
- New housing developments
- Local businesses and the Chamber of Commerce
- Environmental and campaign groups
- LGBTQ+ communities
- People with disabilities
- Working-age adults and families
- Workers from other countries on care visas.

The September meeting highlighted the need for diversity in outreach, noting the large number of arts, sports, and faith groups, and emphasising the need to reach underrepresented communities.

DDE's presentation in October reinforced the importance of long-term relationship-building with minority groups and the value of cultural events, school partnerships, and informal gatherings.

"Engagement with minority communities takes time and trust… informal gatherings allow councillors to meet residents from diverse backgrounds." *(TAFF minutes, 28 October 2025)*

2. Existing Engagement Methods and Opportunities

Across the four meetings, members reviewed current engagement activity and identified opportunities to expand or improve.

Regular engagement channels include:

- Social media (Facebook and Instagram)
- Website and press releases
- Magnolia Centre kiosk
- Councillor representation on outside bodies
- Local newspapers, radio and television
- Newsletters

- The work of the Climate Officer & Arts Manager

Annual or occasional opportunities include:

- Exmouth Festival
- Civic events (Remembrance, Armed Forces Day, Pride, Winter Festival)
- Cultural celebrations (e.g., Windrush Cricket Festival)

The September meeting introduced the idea of other engagement opportunities (included in Appendix). Members agreed that engagement is currently reactive and inconsistent, and that a forward plan is needed to map opportunities throughout the year.

3. Barriers to Effective Engagement

The TAFF identified several challenges:

- **Digital exclusion** particularly among older residents and those in supported accommodation
- **Lack of awareness** of which tier of government is responsible for which services
- **Limited officer capacity** particularly around community engagement and communications
- **Inconsistent councillor attendance** at community events
- **Fragmented communication channels**
- **The ineffectiveness of COLP** which had become too formal and unrepresentative
- **Difficulty staffing engagement events** such as marquees and pop-ups

The September meeting also highlighted the need to prepare for **Quality Council Gold Status**, which requires strong evidence of community engagement.

4. Internal Communication and Councillor Roles

The TAFF highlighted the need for:

- Stronger internal communication
- Clear expectations for new councillors
- Reinstatement of Chairs' meetings
- Councillors acting as "champions" for specific groups
- Improved sharing of ward-level information
- A standing communications update on all Working Party agendas

Members agreed that councillors should take a more active role in attending community events and that some groups may not realise they can invite councillors formally.

5. Data, Monitoring, and Impact

Members discussed the importance of measuring engagement impact and gathering consistent data.

Members discussed an example of a Microsoft form used to record attendance, themes, concerns, demographics, and travel modes. Members agreed that a similar system could support evidence-based decision-making and help identify trends.

The TAFF also noted the need for:

- A monitoring and evaluation strategy
- A quarterly newsletter
- A resident survey to identify priorities
- Welcome packs for new residents

6. Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

LGR presents both risks and opportunities for engagement.

Residents may perceive double-taxation if responsibilities shift without clear communication. Members agreed that early, soft messaging about “future-proofing” the budget could help prepare residents for changes.

The TAFF stressed the need for clarity, transparency, and proactive communication throughout the LGR process.

THE WAY FORWARD

The TAFF concluded that Exmouth Town Council must adopt a more strategic, coordinated, and proactive approach to community engagement. This requires:

- A clear implementation plan linked to the Community Engagement Policy
- Dedicated officer capacity - through Community Engagement and Communications roles
- Stronger internal communication
- A structured annual engagement calendar
- More inclusive and accessible engagement methods
- Improved & increased visibility of councillors in the community - led by the Mayor and Deputy Mayor.
- A shift from reactive to anticipatory engagement
- Better use of data and monitoring

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Section 137 Local Government Act 1972

General Power of Competence

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Financial implications will depend on the level of investment agreed by Council. Potential costs include:

- Recruitment of a Community Engagement Officer and / or Communications Officer
- Costs associated with pop-up engagement events
- Design and printing of welcome packs, newsletters and engagement materials

RECOMMENDATIONS

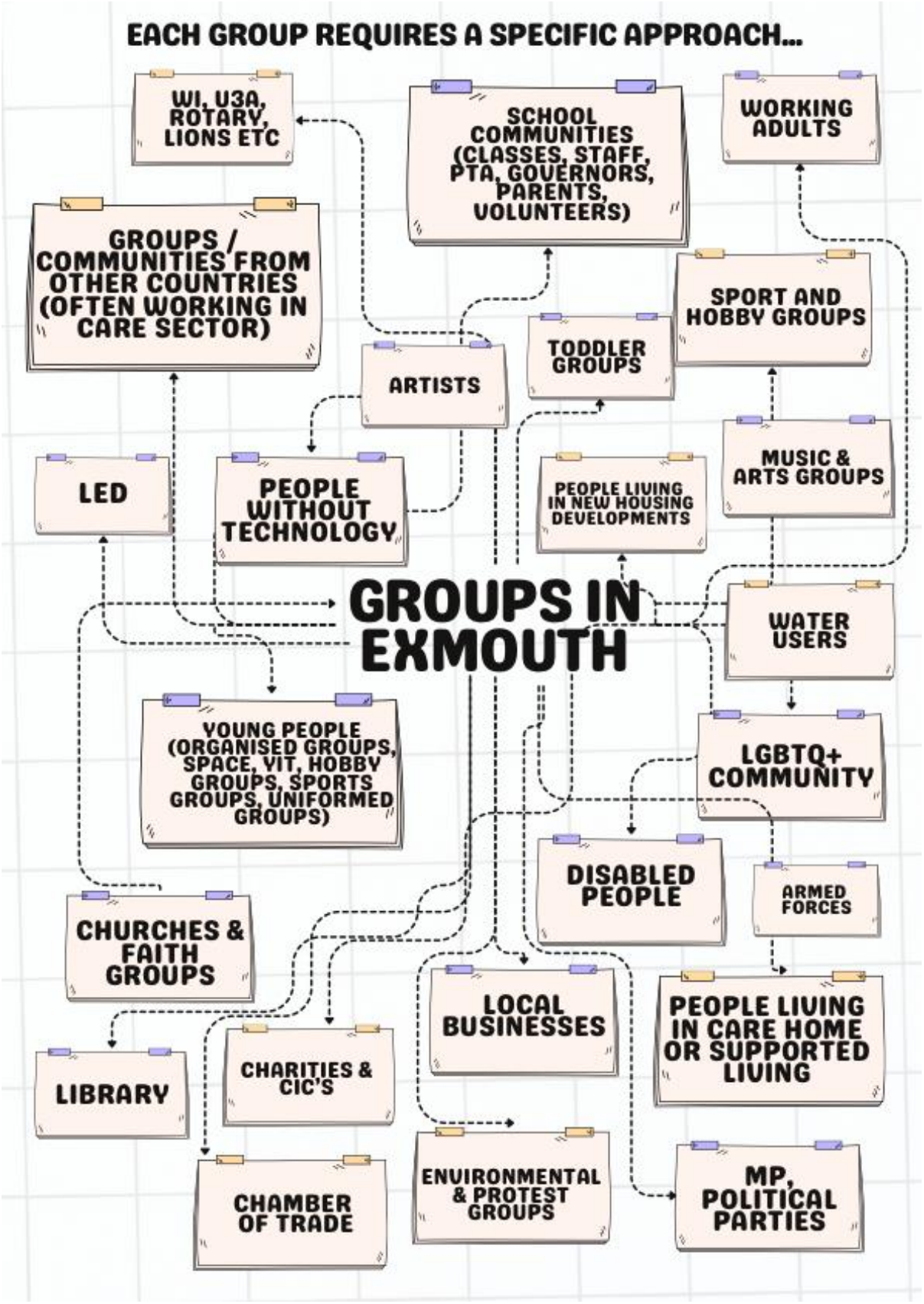
The TAFF recommends that Exmouth Town Council:

1. **Adds a standing Communications Update** to all Working Party agendas.
2. **Establishes a Communications Working Party** to coordinate engagement activity.
3. **Recruits a Community Engagement Officer and/or Communications Officer** to support proactive, consistent engagement and communication.
4. **Dissolves the Community Organisations Liaison Panel (COLP)**
5. **Introduces seasonal informal drop-in sessions** hosted by the Mayor and Town Clerk.
6. **Undertakes an online resident survey** to identify community priorities.
7. **Produces a quarterly newsletter** with limited printed copies available in public venues and for elderly residents.
8. **Creates welcome packs for new residents** distributed via estate agents.
9. **Encourages increased councillor attendance** at community group meetings and events.
10. **Creates a 'Job Role' document for potential Councillors, Mayor and Deputy Mayor** outlining expectations.
11. **Develops an annual engagement plan** mapping opportunities across the year.
12. **Implements a consistent data-collection system** to monitor engagement impact.
13. **Ensures engagement materials are accessible** including translations where appropriate.
14. **Improves public understanding of council responsibilities** particularly in the context of LGR.

APPENDIX:

Groups in Exmouth

How do we and could we engage?


EACH GROUP REQUIRES A SPECIFIC APPROACH...
GROUPS IN EXMOUTH
WI, U3A, ROTARY, LIONS ETC
SCHOOL COMMUNITIES (CLASSES, STAFF, PTA, GOVERNORS, PARENTS, VOLUNTEERS)
WORKING ADULTS
GROUPS / COMMUNITIES FROM OTHER COUNTRIES (OFTEN WORKING IN CARE SECTOR)
SPORT AND HOBBY GROUPS
TODDLER GROUPS
ARTISTS
LED
PEOPLE WITHOUT TECHNOLOGY
PEOPLE LIVING IN NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS
MUSIC & ARTS GROUPS
WATER USERS
YOUNG PEOPLE (ORGANISED GROUPS, SPACE, VIT, HOBBY GROUPS, SPORTS GROUPS, UNIFORMED GROUPS)
LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY
DISABLED PEOPLE
ARMED FORCES
CHURCHES & FAITH GROUPS
LOCAL BUSINESSES
PEOPLE LIVING IN CARE HOME OR SUPPORTED LIVING
LIBRARY
CHARITIES & CIC'S
ENVIRONMENTAL & PROTEST GROUPS
MP, POLITICAL PARTIES
CHAMBER OF TRADE

HOW DO WE (OR COULD WE) ENGAGE?

ONCE A YEAR ENGAGEMENT

- Online survey
- Pop up cuppa cabins in each ward (with TukTuk?)
- Annual Town Meeting
- Civic Service
- Festival
- Mayor's garden party
- Specific events for specific groups
- Pride
- Remembrance
- Armed Forces day
- Winter Festival

IMPACT

- How are we measuring the impact of what we do?
- What is our image / public perception?
- Do we have the capacity to do all we want to do?

NEXT STEPS

- Create an annual plan of opportunities for engagement
- Agree monitoring / impact strategy
- Consider officer capacity

REGULAR ENGAGEMENT

- A mascot
- Other groups' comms channels
- Facebook & Instagram
- Newsletter
- Town Crier
- Local paper
- Cllr reps on outside bodies
- Ward surgeries (could be a multi-agency approach)
- Press releases
- Website
- Big forum events
- Magnolia Kiosk
- Youth Council
- Pulse smart hubs
- "Welcome to Exmouth" directory to new home owners
- GP Surgeries
- Tesco stall
- Informal catch-ups or pop-ins
- Cultural Events

DON'T FORGET!

- Different languages
- Accessible language
- Different learning styles

LISTENING! INFORMING! LISTENING & INFORMING! ENTERTAINING! CIVIC EVENT