

SUBJECT: Increasing Involvement in Local Democracy: Sub-Group Update

MEETING: Democratic Services Committee

DATE: 24th September 2018

DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: ALL

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To provide an update on proposed changes to the way in which the council involves people in decision-making by prioritising issues of most interest to communities and making some minor changes to the report template and accompanying guidance to ensure concise and transparent reports.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the committee endorse the criteria that will be used to prioritise engagement activity, subject to any amendments agreed at the meeting, and keep this under continuous review.
- 2.2 That the committee agree to a future agenda item prioritising potential topics requiring more extensive public involvement using the criteria.
- 2.3 That the committee approve some minor changes to the report template for Council and Cabinet decisions.

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 Local government has a key role in helping communities define the futures to which they aspire and helping the public understand how decisions are made and also how they can participate in the democratic process.
- 3.2 The committee has begun to explore how it can broaden its role by improving public involvement in local democracy creating opportunities to engage with the authority in new ways, working collaboratively and involving people in building sustainable and resilient communities. A working group of the committee has been meeting with officers to take these issues forward.
- 3.3 At its meeting on the 4th June, and based on a recommendation from the sub-group, the committee agreed to take ownership of a forward plan of topics that will be discussed in the coming 12 – 18 months which are likely to be of interest to the public. A set of criteria has now been established to inform which issues are prioritised for public engagement:
- There is evidence of significant public interest in the proposed change or decision
 - It is an area where we anticipate a large number of complaints or negative press as a result of a service change or policy being implemented

- Changes are proposed which could be significantly enhanced by public involvement
 - The authority is facing a challenge and would benefit from developing a broader range of options
 - The proposal would have a major impact on one or more sections of the community
 - We would expect public involvement to add value and be able to shape and influence the final recommendation made to cabinet or council
- 3.4 Work is underway to improve the robustness of the forward planner to enable the committee to have better oversight of the issues that will be coming forward in the months ahead.
- 3.5 A new section of the website will clearly signpost the public how to get involved – for example, topics could be placed on the Made Open platform; questionnaires published on the website or the MyMonmouthshire app. Policy issues or key decisions may be scheduled for public meetings, with local issues being directed to the area committees. In some cases there will be a need to target particular groups or communities with proactive invitations to get involved. This could include groups such as CAIR who campaign on behalf of people with disabilities. A toolbox of engagement approaches will be established to ensure that officers have carry out engagement effectively and that they have access to support from the Communications, Marketing and Engagement Team.
- 3.6 Linked to these proposals will be a series of actions to improve the quality of reports. The report writing guidance for officers is being updated and training established through the authority’s in-house training service. Amongst other things this should result in a clearer statement of purpose, concise and clear language and an explicit statement of any recommendations from scrutiny made related to a particular report.
- 3.7 A series of changes were made to the report template twelve months ago. An officer working group has been looking at the impact of these. Some further revisions are proposed.
- Pushing the Future Generations Sections up so that it follows key issues – this is in response to member feedback
 - Dropping the ‘evaluation’ appendix and condensing key messages from this into the evaluation section. A scan of the evaluation appendices completed has found that these add little to the quality of the report. Robust evaluation will be secured through the adoption of the process identified in a separate paper to be discussed by the committee
- 3.8 These changes will be accompanied by the development of a regular member briefing which will cover important upcoming items as well as staffing updates, consultations and changes which are pertinent to the role of county councillors.
- 3.9 Challenging budgets settlements in the years to come will inevitably mean the Council will need to take harder and potentially more contentious decisions. Earlier involvement, clear reports and better evaluations will increase the public’s understanding and ownership of the proposals developed and the decisions made.

4. REASONS:

4.1 To create opportunities to work more collaboratively with communities to understand the issues that matter and work in new ways with people to develop solutions and promote engagement in local democratic processes.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

5.1 None at this stage

6. WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS IMPLICATIONS (INCORPORATING EQUALITIES, SUSTAINABILITY, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING)

6.1 This report does not propose any change in policy or service. However, it proposes improving how we involve people and this is one of the five ways of working identified in the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

7. CONSULTEES:

This proposal has been developed in conjunction with elected members who are acting as a sub-group of Democratic Services Committee

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

None

9. AUTHOR:

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10. CONTACT DETAILS:

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