SUBJECT: Public Involvement in Democracy: Working Group Update
MEETING: Democratic Services Committee
DATE: 4th June 2018
DIVISIONS/WARDS AFFECTED: All

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To provide the committee with an update on the work of the working-group tasked with considering public involvement in local democracy.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 The Committee has previously begun to explore how the authority can engage the public more meaningfully in the democratic process, creating opportunities to engage with the authority in new ways, work collaboratively and involve people in building sustainable and resilient communities. This is part of a broader desire to understand new perspectives and ideas in democratic development.

2.2 The Committee have received papers titled 'New Directions in Democracy', 'Issues emerging from Public Engagement' and the 'Monmouthshire Made Open Platform'.

2.3 Several members of the committee agreed to form a working group to consider how these recommendations could be taken forward.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 That minutes and action lists for all council meetings be placed at the close of the agenda rather than the beginning, in conjunction with forward work programming.

3.2 That the Democratic Services Committee agrees to broaden its role to promote democracy and public involvement through;

- Overseeing a new element of the council's website that will pilot a new approach to public engagement

- Taking ownership of a forward plan of topics that will be discussed in the next six/nine/twelve months which are likely to be of interest to the public.

3.3 That subject to agreeing 3.2, the Democratic Services Committee identifies a number of issues drawn from appendix 1 that could be used to test the new approach.

4 KEY ISSUES

4.1 Local government has a key role in helping communities to define the futures to which they aspire and helping the public to understand how decisions are made and also

how they can participate in the democratic process. Monmouthshire has a huge amount of social capital but only 21% of people feel they can influence local decisions.

4.2　Our current arrangements are felt to be ineffective in engaging people in democracy. Whilst there are some simple things we can take forward such as tabling routine business (agreeing minutes and future actions) towards the close of the meeting, there is a need for more fundamental change in how we attract the public in debating major issues. The fifteen minute public open forum provides an opportunity for the public to offer a view on the agenda subject matter or to suggest items for future scrutiny. However, it cannot serve as the only mechanism to engage people in democratic debate. The sub-group identified the need to proactively targeting of people to obtain their views and to and encourage participation.

4.3　The group is seeking to improve the information put into the public realm by highlighting forthcoming items that will be of greatest interest to the public or where involvement should be encouraged to ensure community views are reflected. This could be achieved by providing a simple list of topics that will be discussed in the next six/nine/twelve months which are likely to be of interest to the public. It will necessitate closer working between Democratic Services Officers and Business Support Teams to ensure an understanding of the issues emerging from directorate management teams. It is proposed that the Democratic Services Committee oversees this new part of the website, expanding its role from its statutory remit to one of promoting democracy and public involvement, hence in line with the coordinating role that it has agreed to lead on following the disbanding of the Coordinating Board. The Democratic Services Committee would play a key role in overseeing that decisions taken are informed by appropriate levels of involvement and that the public are informed of opportunities to have their say on major issues.

4.4　The 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 to invite input or policy issues or key decisions may be scheduled for public meetings, with local issues being directed to the Area Committees. The website would need to reflect outcomes, for example, feedback/results of the consultation. The working group also recommended capitalising on the high number of users of the 'My Monmouthshire App' to highlight these opportunities to the community (within the confines of the General data Protection Regulations).

4.5　The Democratic Services Committee would need to consider when and how people should be involved, differentiating issues where the public has expertise and experience from ones where specialised knowledge is needed to make decisions. There would be a need for the committee to think carefully about topics and make a distinction between those where engagement is practical and pragmatic and those where there may be polarised/strongly held views that would be unlikely to inform an evidence-led debate.

4.6　Reducing budgets in the years to come will inevitably mean the council will take harder and potentially more contentious decisions. Earlier involvement and better evaluations will increase the public's understanding and ownership of the proposals developed and the decisions made, reducing dissatisfaction and minimising the risk of challenge through a lack of engagement. Most importantly, it will create greater opportunities to harness the social capital and knowledge within our communities in order to shape better solutions to the challenges that public services will face in the years ahead.

4.7　The approval of a Corporate Plan setting out an ambitious programme of work means that members and officers have clarity on the areas that the organisation will be

focusing on over the next four-and-a-half years. It also includes some specific references to how this will be done which are central to the work of the Democratic Services Committee, such as:

- Strengthening decision making and accountability;
- Re-shaping our governance arrangements (including more detailed options appraisals);
- Identifying ways to increase public involvement in local democracy and scrutiny to enhance local decision-making
- Ensuring meaningful community engagement, extending the reach of the 'Monmouthshire Made Open' platform

A list of potential topics that could be used to pilot this new way of working is included as appendix 1 for the committee's consideration.

4.8 These proposals represent a small step of the 'ladder of participation'. Any move towards a more participatory form of democracy may not be welcomed by all members and consideration will need to be given to a full council discussion at some stage.

5. 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. FUTURE GENERATIONS ASSESSEMENT INCLUDING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS:

6.1 This report does not propose any change in policy or service and so no assessment has been completed.

7. SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS

None

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

9. AUTHORS

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Appendix 1

What we could focus on as a test case

a. Top Ten Issues reported through app, hubs and contact centre (numbers in brackets show interactions during the 6 months to 23/10/17)

- Council Tax (2,926)
- Register for waste collection (1,736)
- Replacement waste bags (1,519)
- Highways, roads and transport (1,244)
- Missed Bins (1054)
- Replacement waste permits (625)
- Grass-Routes Bus cancellation (583)
- Fly-tipping (325)
- Trees and hedges (275)
- Foodbank Voucher (264)

b. Emerging from Well-being Assessment (for a full list see pages 30-31 of the well-being assessment)

- Low wages and high property prices *(wages for local jobs are below the Wales average, property prices are above the UK average making it hard for families to live and work here)*
- Limited public transport and impact of car journeys on air pollution *(journey times on public from rural Monmouthshire to nearest facilities can average over 2 hours, we have high levels of out-commuting and pollution from private cars)*
- Reducing physical activity and resulting rising obesity and type 2 diabetes
- Pressure on health and care services from an ageing population *(the proportion of over 85s will increase by 184% over the next 20 years)*
- Inequality between communities and within communities *(eFSM attainment gap in education; worse education, employment and housing outcomes for care leavers, employment and big gap in wages between local jobs and those earned by out-commuters, largest male: female wage differential in Wales at £149 per week)*
- First thousand days of a child's life and reducing adverse childhood experiences *(Public Health Wales research shows that adverse childhood experiences can alter how children's brains develop and they are more likely to adopt health-harming behaviours)*
- Positive impact of Arts and culture on emotional health and well-being (anecdotal but widely held view)
- Air pollution is a significant contributor to premature deaths *(Monmouthshire has high levels of private car journeys and a high carbon footprint per residents compared to other areas)*

c. Raised with members during the election campaign (as reported to democratic services team)

- Road safety and speeding
- Highways
- Traffic and parking
- Infrastructure and regeneration
- Litter
- Education

d. Corporate Plan

- Best possible start in life
- Thriving and connected county
- Natural and build environment
- Lifelong well-being
- Forward-looking, future-focused council

e. Future Monmouthshire

- Automation, artificial intelligence and the future of public services (reducing back office costs through effective application of technology before regional models are pursued)
- Procurement and better use of data *(open up our data to increase accountability, drive efficiencies and enable developers to build applications that will add civic value)*
- Public Transport / Technology-enabled rural transport solutions for 21st century
- Customer Journey / Improved Customer service *(PI data shows we're a high performing council but our customer satisfaction isn't high, nudge people towards self-service, greater use of technology like My Monmouthshire and improve customer service throughout the organisation)*
- Well-being *(keep people truly independent using community networks rather than traditional social care packages)*
- Assets and Energy *(maximise income and reduce environmental impact)*