

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SCRUTINY TASK GROUP

December 2020

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1** At the 13 February 2019 Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) Budget Council, an amendment was proposed by Cllr Ward and Cllr R Smith to create a Public Participation Officer role dedicated to improving the public's experience of engaging with Council meetings and consultations.
- 1.2** This budget amendment was later withdrawn, subject to a commitment for a task group to be set up instead to examine how people engage with the council and how engagement could be improved.
- 1.3** The ambitions for the review were as follows;
- To understand what GCC does at present in terms of improving public participation;
 - To explore how effective these processes are at helping the public to meaningfully engage and promote active citizenship;
 - To learn from relevant outside sources and other Local Authorities to identify examples of best practice; and
 - To make recommendations, including any resource implications that would enhance public engagement with the Council and its processes (copy of the full one page strategy at Annex 1).
- 1.4** Membership of the Task Group: Councillors Eva Ward, Stephen Hirst, Shaun Parsons, Lesley Williams, Rachel Smith and Kate Haigh. Councillor Eva Ward was appointed as chair.
- 1.5** The group met three times from November 2019 to February 2020 to develop their understanding of how GCC performed in this year currently, and explore examples of how this could be improved. Following the Covid-19 pandemic the group paused its work, reconvening in September 2020. The group reflected on the changes in working practice over that time and lessons learned with regards to public participation.

2 CURRENT PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

- 2.1** Members discussed with officers from Democratic Services the current levels of participation in the democratic process and what potential barriers there may be to increasing participation. Members noted that the Council allows public questions at full Council and Cabinet meetings. At every full council meeting, 30 minutes was dedicated to public questions. A full overview of procedure for public questions can be found under Part 4, Procedural Standing Orders, and Section 8 of the Council's constitution.

- 2.2** As with the majority of councils in England, the County Council runs a petitions scheme and petitions may be submitted by residents. They should have at least 25 signatures for a response and must include: clear and concise statements covering the subject of the petition and include details of what action the petitioners wish the Council to take, the name, the address in Gloucestershire where they live, work or study and signature of any person supporting the petition. Petitions must reach 5000 signatures to be scheduled for debate at full council. Petitions may be rejected if they are considered to be vexatious, abusive or otherwise inappropriate. E-petitions can also be made through the county council website.
- 2.3** County council meetings are livestreamed via webcam and officers were currently planning to roll out webcam access to the Cabinet Suite to enable Cabinet meetings and more scrutiny committees to be livestreamed. Full council meetings typically had the most views. During the Covid-19 pandemic, council meetings have been held virtually using web-ex software. This has allowed members to access the meeting from their own homes with the meetings streamed on YouTube.
- 2.4** The Health Overview Scrutiny Committee has also run a pilot for opportunities for public representation. Members of the public must write to Democratic Services with their intention to speak three working days before a meeting and they will have three minutes to speak on a relevant matter or ask a question.
- 2.5** Members spoke to the Communications Team to understand engagement through social media and consultations. This served to improve understanding of the current context and examine how effectively social media and consultations were used to encourage public participation.
- 2.6** Communications produce several e-newsletters for residents focused on a range of topics. A mailing list specifically for consultations had 3,120 subscribers as of January 2020. Consultations impacting a particular topic such as schools would also be sent out through additional relevant mailing list e.g. school updates. All consultations are also sent to town and parish council clerks and major consultations sent out to those subscribed to news and updates bulletins, 7,660 subscribers as of January 2020.

3. CONSULTATION

- 3.1** Details of major consultations are also added to the Council's website and sent to media contacts, generally via a press release.
- 3.2** Gloucestershire County Council uses Twitter and Facebook as its primary social media platforms to share information on consultations and other relevant information and updates. The council's corporate Twitter account has 18,990

followers on Twitter as of December 2019 and the average engagement ratio was 6.32 users per tweet. On Facebook, the council corporate page has 4,130 likes and an average engagement ratio of 1.43 per post.

3.3 Details of consultations are also shared via other routes that are specific/ relevant to the geographical or subject matter being consulted on.

3.4 The Council engages the Consultation Institute to both review its overall consultation process and or advice and support on specific matters on an ad-hoc basis.

3.5 One member of the group shared her experience of meetings as part of the consultation for the Local Transport Plan Review. An officer from transport planning was invited to brief the group on the consultation process and answer questions.

- The public consultation on the draft Local Transport Plan utilised both online surveys and public events across the county. The online survey ran for ten weeks and was publicised through GCC social media, local media, mailing lists, libraries and district and parish councils.
- The draft LTP for consultation generated 23,239 engagement contacts during the extended 10 week public consultation period (16 January – 26 March) in stage 2 of a two year process. Consultation included extensive representation via the dedicated e-mail inbox, public share events, daytime surgeries, evening presentations, partnership meetings, online website, social media, use of GovDelivery, GCC news feeds and Parish & District links. Officers provided online accessible documents, presentations and surveys to maximise public engagement.
- Early engagement in the initial stage of the LTP Review included consultation with senior District Council officers and local interest groups. Protected characteristic groups were also invited to engage at an early stage, and GCC Transport Planning officers held one-to-one meetings or gave presentations to representative groups when requested.
- During the LTP public consultation, a series of 20 scheduled consultation events were planned and held across the county, which included (on request) an additional event for Stroud Town Centre (library). LTP consultation events were spread geographically around the county and held at District Council offices and at main shopping centres as public share events
- Two drop in events and one evening event have been held in each district. At drop in events, members of the public can 'opt in' for further contact so they can give further input or can be informed on how their feedback is being used.

A launch event for councillors was also held in January.

- Members of the group raised a number of questions including how the location of drop in events was chosen and what the input of councillors and local residents was in those decisions. It was commented that involving the public and councillors at different tiers of local government early in the process allowed it to be shaped to be responsive to the needs of communities.
- In reply it was confirmed that Officers in transport planning were supported by communications to develop a consultation plan and to analyse the results when completed. However, capacity for ongoing support could be limited due to the workloads of both teams.
- Further details can be found in the comprehensive 40 page LTP Consultation Report available at:
<https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/2099728/gcc-ltp-consultation-report-final-issued-180620.pdf>

3.6 The Group noted that on some decisions there was an obligation to consult and that consultation was the foundation of good governance. It was important to consult in a variety of ways according to a strategy that allowed a wide cross section of the community to be reached. Members emphasised the importance of tailoring consultations to enable those 'hard to reach' communities the ability to respond. The group discussed consultation alongside engagement techniques such as citizen's juries and people assemblies to highlight that the approach had to be flexible. Members received reassurance that a balanced approach was taken that took into account those strong views on a topic as well as those from stakeholders with a more neutral perspective.

4. IMPROVING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

- 4.1 The group noted the good work that was taking place both in allowing members of the public to engage with the democratic process through participation in meetings and petitions. In addition members appreciated the work of the Communication Team in reviewing processes and looking to continue to evolve the consultation process. Members considered what could be done to help move those processes forward and add value.
- 4.2 In January, the chair and a democratic services support officer attended a conference on participatory democracy to learn from other local authorities and

bring effective examples of participatory and deliberative democracy to the group to inform recommendations and future work.

- An example of deliberative democracy which featured heavily at the conference was Citizens' Assemblies. A citizens' assembly is a group of people who are brought together to discuss an issue or issues and reach a conclusion about what they think should happen. The people who take part are chosen so they reflect the wider population – in terms of demographics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, social class) and sometimes relevant attitudes (e.g. preferences for a small or large state). These had been used by some borough and metropolitan borough authorities such as Dudley and London Boroughs.
- Another key point of learning was that local authorities needed to think and do things creatively to engage with citizens, particularly from groups who were less likely to engage through the current routes. An example noted was Calderdale Council who began wide scale public conversations through online means and by officers starting conversations with residents in busy public areas such as shopping centres. Feedback and conversations are used to inform Vision 2024 for the area.
- It was felt within the group that a conference held within Gloucestershire would help all tiers of local government to learn from each other and look at what good participation looks like in Gloucestershire.

- 4.3 The group raised the question of how areas within Gloucester and Cheltenham, which do not have parish councils, are brought together and engaged in democratic and consultation processes. Another point raised was how the council could utilise new social media platforms which young people were more likely to use to engage more young people in local democracy.
- 4.4 Members raised the issue of presentation of information. It was felt that this was an area that could be improved. Better presentation of the message and opportunities for engagement would help to encourage a response from the public. It was recognised that any conversation was a two way process.
- 4.5 The group noted that members of the public were required to be physically present at full council meetings to ask a supplementary question to any question they submitted prior to the meeting. Members identified this as a barrier for some, particularly those who work during the day as council meetings are typically held between 10am and 4pm. A question was also raised as to whether representation could be expanded to public statements as well as questions, and whether members could have the right to reply to correct anything said which may be inaccurate. It was also noted that methods of asking questions and making representations were not often publicised or promoted, which hindered appropriate public participation.

- 4.6 The group noted that in recent months the virtual meetings have allowed members of the public to ask their question without being physically present at the meeting and it is important that this flexibility is not lost when the Council returns to face to face meetings. Consideration could be given to having a facility to allow supplementary questions to be asked when an individual can not attend the meeting. For example via video, telephone or written submission.
- 4.7 During the Covid-19 lockdown, local authorities ran online question time sessions with Cabinet members and officers and this might continue to be a useful tool going forward. Noting the sessions that allowed participation from the public, Members felt that this should be built upon and more question and answer sessions arranged virtually to allow the public to ask questions on particular topics.
- 4.8 Members discussed the developments in home working and remote access to meetings that has been necessitated by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown. These tools should enhance the ways in which the public can engage and participate within the democratic process without looking to replace opportunities for face to face engagement.
- 4.9 Members suggested that regular notifications of new petitions could be sent to all members to help monitor the effectiveness of the promotion of how to submit petitions
- 4.10 The public representation pilot at the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee has been received well and representations have been received on a range of issues, from mental health services to pharmacy planning. Members felt that other scrutiny committees would benefit from having a similar item on their agendas and that this would provide the public with an opportunity to ask questions on the topic that were resonated more strongly with them. Scrutiny should include topics where there is a strong public mandate for action and this would allow members to be better informed when considering topics for their work plans.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the above evidence gathering, the task group make the following recommendations and conclusions to Cabinet as a way of improving the ways in which the public can engage.

- A. To ensure that the facility of public questions at meetings of County Council, Cabinet and other committee meetings are clearly outlined on the website and that there is appropriate promotion through the Council's Communications Team.
- B. That a facility for supplementary questions be provided to allow them to be asked via video, telephone or written submission.
- C. Notifications of petitions received and the response to be sent to members regularly via communications channels such as the Members Matters weekly update (updated and maintained on the Members' website).
- D. That a review be carried out of the Consultation processes, including how feedback from councillors and members of the public can help to ensure they are carried out more effectively. Members should be consulted on the terms of reference for the review.
- E. That the Communications Team continue to work on improving how information is presented.
- F. Review the County's Community Charter, which at present sets out the way engagement is carried out between the county council and town and parish councils This review will include gathering intel and insight of approaches to consultation and engagement to extend the charter to allow all residents and to benefit from the offer.
- G. Building on the previous question and answer sessions held during the summer, to provide further opportunities for the public to ask questions to cabinet members through virtual meetings at dedicated meetings.

In addition the task group wishes to recommend to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee that:

- H. The public representation pilot being carried out by Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee be made a standing item and expanded to all other scrutiny committees.

ANNEX 1 - ONE PAGE STRATEGY

SCRUTINY REVIEW – ONE PAGE STRATEGY	
Broad topic area	Public Participation (Accountability/Transparency)
Specific topic area	<p>Public Engagement</p> <p>How do people engage in Council, Cabinet and scrutiny procedures and how can it be improved?</p>
Ambitions for the review	<p>Understand what GCC does at present</p> <p>Explore how effective these processes are at helping the public to meaningfully engage and promote active citizenship</p> <p>Learn from relevant outside sources and other LAs to identify examples of best practice</p> <p>Make recommendations, including any resource implications that would enhance public engagement with the Council and its processes</p>
How do we perform at the moment?	<p>Response rates to consultations/surveys on important community decisions (such as library moves)</p> <p>Consider what data can be published</p> <p>Webcasting meetings and trialling public representations at Health and Care Overview and Scrutiny</p> <p>Public questions at Council/Cabinet</p> <p>‘Inform Gloucestershire’, MAIDEN and JSNA</p> <p>“30k local residents get updates” via a range of newsletters</p>
Who and how should we consult?	<p>Communications team</p> <p>Other LAs and relevant organisations (eg Kirklees Democracy Commission)</p> <p>Current Members (community engagement)</p> <p>Chair of HCOSC to ascertain success of public representations at meetings</p> <p>Members of the public (opinions obtained via elected representatives at Council, district and parish levels)</p> <p>Democratic Services Team</p>
Background information	<p>Amendment proposed at Council on the 13th of February to create an Officer role regarding public participation. A commitment to a task group was given instead</p>

	Recent scrutiny review explored how the public participated at these meetings and has suggested some changes, this task group provides a chance to analyse their success and explore new options
Support	Support from Communications and Democratic Services
How long will it take?	6 months from approval
Outcomes	<p>Recommendations linked to supporting members of the public to meaningfully engage in decision making</p> <p>Recommendations to improve the availability of information and transparency in decision-making, at all levels</p>