

Date: 17 January 2024

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Dear Julie,

PRAP Scrutiny Committee 10 January 2024: Participation Strategy

On behalf of the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee my sincere thanks for attending Committee on 10 January 2024 to present the Council's final draft Participation Strategy. Please also pass on my appreciation to the Head of Performance and Partnerships, Gareth Newell, Head of Democratic Services Gary Jones, Operational Manager Policy & Performance, Dylan Owen and Principal Researcher, Claire Owens, for supporting the scrutiny. I have been asked to pass on Members' comments, observations and recommendations following discussion at the Way Forward.

Overview

The Committee's overwhelming view was that this final draft Participation Strategy represents good quality policy work that will continue evolving over time. We note your conviction that every citizen voice matters. There is a clear driving force within the policy to ensure that where the Council cannot access a representative sample in a live consultation exercise it will invest in face-to-face engagement with diverse and hard to reach communities. There is also an awareness of opportunities for improvement. We were particularly pleased to hear you have accessed the Shared Prosperity Fund to appoint 4 additional staff to enhance face-to-face engagement in the next 18 months.

Part 1

Closing the feedback loop – Members continue to seek assurance that closing the feedback loop post consultation is a priority for directorates. We note you consider feedback is currently passive and subject to team capacity. However, in future you will take practical steps, such as using social media platforms, developing quarterly

newsletters with links to Cabinet and Scrutiny reports, and targeting communities of interest more directly.

Breaking down barriers - Members were keen to establish why some citizens are difficult to contact. We note your view that, in the case of ethnic minorities, it is primarily because they are unaware of the availability of information, however improvements are actively sought with the Council asking other employers/partners to share their networks. We also note your aspiration to break down barriers by developing a dynamic relationship with advocacy groups.

EIA's - Members consider that Equality Impact Assessments (EIA'S) are a key element of consultation, and, in this respect, it would be useful if the Council had a KPI, with a target, to enable the monitoring of engagement with underrepresented groups over time. We are pleased officers agree that monitoring progress on this matter needs to be in place and we are therefore recommending that you consider setting a target as part of your forthcoming Corporate Plan discussions.

The Committee recognises that co-production in policy development and service planning is especially important, and communities engage when a topic is particularly relevant to them. We were therefore pleased that officers consider the Participation Strategy will assist in building a gateway to working with the Council by increasing its database, and plans are in place to ensure that, going forward, EIA's play an important role in the co-production of service delivery policy.

Corporate control - The Committee expressed the importance of corporate-wide control of consultation, to ensure all engagement is valuable and good practice. We were therefore pleased to hear that the Senior Management Team take a view that all directorate consultation must seek assurance from Cardiff Research Centre, to ensure it meets good practice.

Comparative reporting - Whilst Members agree that qualitative data is extremely useful, and they welcome the favourable quantitative response figures comparative to other authorities, we consider you should be reporting proportions rather than population, to ensure parity of comparison.

Hard copy distribution - Officers were clear that, as part of the Participation Strategy, the Council will attempt to engage with a broader variety of community organisations. Members felt strongly that the circulation of hard copy versions of council consultations should extend to all wards. Specifically, where there are no Council premises (hubs/libraries) in wards, then in non-council community venues. Members are delighted with the recognition that grass roots community groups will unlock an improvement in response numbers and consider they could assist with identifying and connecting suitable venues.

Part 2

The Committee welcomed the positive developments to address the democratic engagement requirements of the Local Government and Election (Wales) Act 2022, such as the Democracy Ambassador Programme for schools, the Democracy Portal and self-assessment of Democratic Services. However, Members also raised some concerns you may wish to reflect on further.

Political party contact -The Committee notes your view that in seeking to correctly implement the Participation Strategy the Council must be mindful of engaging with all political groups and independent candidates equally. Members feel it is important to be honest and ensure full understanding that potential election candidates must either be a member of a political party or stand as an independent member. Importantly the strategy should stress candidates must be prepared to work hard for the community.

Democracy Portal - Members expressed caution in respect of the Democracy Portal. They feel it is important that the Portal does not simply duplicate information that is available elsewhere (*e.g. the Council website*). Members cautioned that supporting the Portal could become resource intensive, at a time of financial and resource pressure. However, we applaud the aim to make information more accessible by removing jargon, simplifying and shortening reports. Therefore, we urge you to continue researching best practice, your work with partners and associations, and to access advice from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.

Information review - Members acknowledged that standard report templates, procedures, and some bureaucracy is necessary for informed decision making.

However, we consider it would be useful to review the scale and helpfulness of Scrutiny Committee and Full Council papers. The aim would be to establish whether councillors feel the scale of papers leads to informed debate. Members also suggested that papers should be accessible not only to committee members but to all communities and cut back on jargon to improve public engagement.

Age range - Members felt that the age range targeted with information on access to public office could be expanded to include over 65's, given the upward trajectory of the working age.

To summarise, the Committee makes 2 formal recommendations as set out below. As part of the response to this letter I would be grateful if you could, for each recommendation, state whether the recommendation is accepted, partially accepted or not accepted and summarise the Cabinet's response. If the recommendation is accepted or partially accepted, I would also be grateful if you could identify the responsible officer and provide an action date. This will ensure that progress can be monitored as part of the approach agreed by Cabinet.

Recommendation	Accepted, Partially Accepted or Not Accepted	Cabinet Response	Responsible Officer	Action Date
Part 1 - As part of forthcoming Corporate Plan discussions, you consider creating a KPI, and setting a target, to monitor progress on engaging with underrepresented groups.				
Part 2 - Review with Members the scale and helpfulness of Scrutiny Committee and Full Council papers to establish whether councillors feel the scale of papers leads to informed debate.				

Finally, on behalf of the Committee, thank you once again for the opportunity of pre-decision scrutiny of the Participation Strategy. With your support, I look forward to continuing the Committee's monitoring of this strategy and its aspirations. I have captured our suggestions as recommendations, and I therefore look forward to a response.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR JOEL WILLIAMS

CHAIR, POLICY REVIEW AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

cc Members of the Policy Review & Performance Scrutiny Committee;
Leaders of Opposition Parties – John Lancaster, Rodney Berman & Andrea Gibson;
Gareth Newell, Head of Partnerships and Performance;
Gary Jones, Head of Democratic Services
Dylan Owen, OM Policy & Performance
Claire Owens, Principal Research & Consultation Officer;
Mr Gavin McArthur, Chair, Governance & Audit Committee
Chris Pyke, OM Governance & Audit;
Tim Gordon, Head of Communications
Jeremy Rhys, Assistant Head of Communications and External Affairs
Claire Deguara, Cabinet Business Manager
Heather Warren, Cabinet Support Officer
Andrea Redmond, Committee Support Officer