

Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

16th October 2013

Public Engagement in Overview and Scrutiny

Recommendation

That the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the Public Engagement in Overview and Scrutiny Toolkit and the adoption of the Toolkit for future scrutiny activity.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 In 2012, Democratic Services undertook a Scrutiny Member Survey which asked specific questions regarding public engagement in the Council's Overview and Scrutiny function. The survey demonstrated the view that scrutiny needed to be more 'outward-facing', with improved and more consistent methods of public engagement.
- 1.2 Public engagement in Overview and Scrutiny is an area that the majority of local authorities struggle to achieve, predominately due to public apathy or lack of awareness. However, public engagement should be a key element of the scrutiny process, both in the suggestion of scrutiny topics and as a key contributor in the evidence-gathering process. Public engagement helps to increase the validity and relevance of scrutiny topics by reflecting issues which matter to residents. It strengthens the public's voice by helping scrutiny members to be a champion of their constituents. Furthermore, the views of the public should be an important part of the evidence that members consider when forming recommendations, to ensure that the recommendations have the intended positive effect.
- 1.3 At the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board on 20th February 2013, members agreed to the development of a toolkit by Democratic Services, which would provide a structured and co-ordinated approach for a) undertaking communication with the public (i.e. blogs, consultations) and b) responding to key issues, with the involvement and assistance of the appropriate Council services. It was agreed that this be presented back to members for consideration and the final version is attached at **Appendix A**.
- 1.4 For the development of the Toolkit, in the first instance Democratic Services held discussions with the Localities and Partnerships teams to identify information-sharing opportunities and how the team could support the Overview and Scrutiny function in terms of signposting to appropriate partners and community-level groups, such as residents associations, adult/youth

groups and religious/faith groups. Discussions also took place with the Communications team and the Corporate Consultation Officer regarding how to use the different channels appropriately (i.e. the web, social media, video, print and radio) and different engagement methods.

2.0 Public Engagement in Overview and Scrutiny Toolkit

- 2.1 The toolkit is for work undertaken by Overview and Scrutiny Committees and members only, and is not an approach for wider public engagement by the Council as this is already led by the Communications team and various other frontline services.
- 2.2 The toolkit provides scrutiny members a step-by-step approach to engaging and involving the public in scrutiny activity, if considered appropriate. The key stages are:
- 1) What is the overall aim/objective of the engagement?
 - 2) Who are the participant groups? Stakeholders, citizens, communities and/or consumers?
 - 3) Does the engagement need to be open or selective?
 - 4) Which specific groups need to be involved? Can the wider general public also be involved?
 - 5) What engagement methods will be used?
- 2.3 The intention is to use the Toolkit at the scoping stage of scrutiny activity to formally plan out engagement, in order to ensure that the appropriate community groups are contacted and that the engagement methods applied are suitable.

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Public Engagement in Overview and Scrutiny Strategy

“Good public scrutiny enables the voice and concerns of public and its communities.” (Centre for Public Scrutiny)

*Working for
Warwickshire*

1.0 Purpose of the Strategy/Toolkit

The purpose of this document is to provide the Democratic Services team and Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members with a practical, step-by-step guide to achieving structured and meaningful public engagement in scrutiny topics and reviews.

The document is underpinned by the County Council's Public Consultation and Engagement Guidance, in order to present the corporate approach in a concise and focused toolkit that is relevant and specific to public engagement in Overview and Scrutiny.

2.0 What is Public Engagement? Why is it important?

As outlined in the County Council's Public Consultation and Engagement Guidance, greater public empowerment and engagement can deliver the following benefits:

- It can be a catalyst for positive change.
- It can provide a real opportunity for the communities to develop and evolve.
- It can provide a real opportunity to build public trust.
- It can help strengthen public confidence in the Council.
- It can provide a real opportunity to improve services and help improve residents' lives.
- It can reduce the risk of providing inadequate services.
- It can lead to finding innovative solutions.
- It informs good and responsible decision making

When applying this to the County Council's Overview and Scrutiny function, public engagement clearly helps to increase the validity and relevance of scrutiny topics by reflecting issues which matter to residents. It strengthens the public's voice by helping scrutiny members to be a champion of their constituents and encouraging the public to help influence where improvements can positively impact service delivery for service users. Furthermore, the views of the public should be an important part of the evidence that members consider when analysing the issues and forming recommendations, to ensure that outcomes and recommendations have the intended positive effect.

In light of this, there is a strong case that public engagement should be a key element of the Overview and Scrutiny process, both in the suggestion of scrutiny topics and as a key contributor in the evidence-gathering process.

3.0 Is public engagement appropriate?

Public engagement can be appropriate for both Task and Finish Group reviews and for scrutiny topics discussed at Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings; therefore, at the scoping phase and the agenda setting phase respectively, the following question must always be asked: "is it appropriate to engage the public *at all*?"

There are clearly times when engagement is not the right approach; for example, when the review is sensitive or confidential in its nature, or focused on internal processes and operational matters which have no direct public impact and for which public interest would be difficult to generate.

The following three questions can provide direction as to whether public engagement is appropriate:

- Does the service/policy/issue that is being reviewed have an impact on residents, sections of the community, business, partners or the voluntary sector?
- Would the public want to submit their views/experiences on a particular service/policy/issue?
- In the case of a Task and Finish Group review, do members anticipate that their recommendations that will have an impact on residents, sections of the community, business, partners or the voluntary sector.

If the answer is 'yes' to any of the above, there is a strong case to engage the public as part of either the Committee's or Task and Finish Group's consideration of the scrutiny topic.

The next step is to clarify the key objective and aim of public engagement, which need to be agreed by the members and then embedded into the engagement method. Although there are many good reasons for public engagement, it is crucial that members are clear about the rationale for public engagement and to effectively communicate that to all participants at the relevant stages. Lack of clarity can be one of the biggest causes of failure in public engagement exercises.

To what extent do we want to engage the public?

As outlined in the County Councils' Public Consultation and Engagement Guidance, there are a number of objectives and aims for public engagement. The one most pertinent to Overview and Scrutiny activity is '*Engage – to work collaboratively with groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people, e.g. Community Forums*'.

In the context of Overview and Scrutiny, public engagement will:

- Enable the public to share their experiences and views on the service/policy/issue; and
- Enable the public to submit suggestions about why and how improvements or changes should be made to the service or policy that will positively impact them and other customers.

What issues do we need to be aware of?

One of the greatest risks to the County Council when engaging with the public is damage to its reputation. There is the potential that expectations will be raised and that residents – some of whom will have little knowledge of the decision-making process – will expect that scrutiny members have the power to make decisions. There is therefore a risk that people attending scrutiny meetings or participating in reviews will be disappointed that no 'decision' has been made. More engagement does not necessarily mean better engagement, and the impact of poor engagement can be worse than having no engagement at all.

To overcome this, it is recommended that a simple leaflet be developed for the public, outlining what to expect through participation in scrutiny and what the members will do with the 'evidence' provided by the public. There also needs to be transparency, honesty and clarity about the purpose of their participation, the limits of what can and cannot be changed and what happens as a result, e.g. the scrutiny body will seek to make recommendations to the Cabinet.

Lack of participation is also a risk when embarking on a public engagement exercise, with the possibility of a low return for the level of time and effort applied; however, if the engagement is appropriate, planned and targeted to the right groups, this will greatly improve overall participation. The following two sections of the strategy outline how engagement activities should be planned in order to achieve that.

4.0 Who can we speak to?

How wide should our engagement be?

Once it has been agreed that public engagement is appropriate for a particular scrutiny topic, and we know what the overall objective and aims will be, the next step is to identify *who* should be engaged. Prior to identifying and selecting those people, it is valuable to initially differentiate whether engagement should be with stakeholders, citizens, communities and/or consumers:

Who are they?	Why would they be interested in the scrutiny topic/review?
Stakeholders	They feel they have a stake in the issue – either being affected by any decision or being able to affect that decision. These may be organisational representatives or individuals.
Citizens	They are the wider public / society who may have a right and interest in being involved. Citizenship is a political act, with people taking responsibility on behalf of the wider society (e.g. the Citizens Panel).
Communities	They may be defined by identity (e.g. minority ethnic), interest or religion but most often, in terms of participation, communities are defined geographically (e.g. by neighbourhood or village).
Customers	They are both existing and potential future customers of the service delivered by the County Council.

There are no absolutes in terms of selecting participant groups, and more than one group may be required. The key decision here is ensuring that the right group is selected, according to the nature and content of the scrutiny review and the objective of public engagement, as outlined in 3.0.

Once the participant groups have been selected, a decision then needs to be made regarding how open and inclusive the engagement should be. This stage will help to identify exactly which groups should be involved. In general terms, there are two ways of thinking about selecting participants:

- **Open** – inclusive, anyone that wants to should be able to participate.
- **Selective** – in that the numbers, types and actual individual participants may be chosen as part of the process.

Which groups should be involved?

It is impossible to record every engagement group that is available to the County Council; many groups evolve and dissolve over time. To overcome this, four key sources from within the County Council have been identified that can act as a conduit between members and the specific groups that they are wanting to engage with. When seeking advice from these sources, it is essential to be clear about the following key areas:

- The nature and content of the scrutiny review
- The aim and objective of public engagement in the scrutiny review
- The participant groups to be involved, e.g. stakeholder, consumer
- Whether the engagement is to be open or selective

Once these four key areas have been agreed by members, the following sources are able to provide guidance and advice on specific groups of people to contact.

- 1) Localities and Partnerships team – the team has extensive knowledge of and link to a wide range of partners and community-level groups, such as residents associations, adult/youth groups and religious/faith groups; therefore, the team is best placed to advise on the appropriate groups to contact and how best to contact them. The team will also co-ordinate your contact with Warwickshire Community and Voluntary Action (CAVA), which has links to an extensive range of community and voluntary groups across the county. **Key contact Jenny Murray**
- 2) Corporate Consultation Officer – the officer will be able to signpost you to the relevant services to contact, who will have knowledge of and links to community and specialist interest groups that may be appropriate to engage. **Key contact Renata Conduit**
- 3) Communications – this service engages the public and the media through a host of different channels, including the web, social media, video, print and radio. The service can advise on the messages and information we may wish to give and the appropriate channels to use and how to manage these. **Key contact Jayne Surman**
- 4) People Group – this group has dedicated Peer Audit Officers who will be able to advise on the range of community interest groups and partners that could be engaged. **Key contact Rachel Flowers**

What about the wider *general* public?

Traditional forms of communication, as well as modern social media, should be considered for *all* public engagement activities due to its minimal cost and ease. Because of this, it is anticipated that this form of communication will be undertaken either on its own, or to complement other engagement methods.

This method of engagement is particularly good for informing the wider general public about a scrutiny review/topic with the purpose to a) invite to an open public meeting (at which, different methods of engagement exercises will be used); and b) invite views and feedback on the service/policy/issue that is being discussed or reviewed by the members. Although this method may not necessarily engage directly with the public, it will encourage views from a wider audience to be shared. In all cases, the communication must be structured and targeted.

The following options should be considered:

- Democratic Services active blog – WarksDemocracy – can be used to communicate with the public and partners.
- The County Council’s ‘Ask Warwickshire’ web site, which hosts a range of consultation, e-petitions and discussion forums also provides an opportunity for the promotion of recent scrutiny topics and reviews, with a view to encouraging ‘conversations’ with members of the public as a way of gathering views.
- Communications – has knowledge of service-specific blogs and Twitter accounts, which can be used to publicise the scrutiny review.
- Localities and Partnerships team has a range of existing communication methods and mechanisms that can be used to promote scrutiny activity to the wider public, as well as to specific sectors of the community.

Traditional media should also always be considered, as it continues to be a preferred form of communication for some. The publication of press releases has generated public interest in previous scrutiny topics and should continue to be used to complement social media. The Council’s Communications team will be able to assist with the preparation of press releases.

What issues do we need to be aware of?

It is important to seek guidance from the relevant sources listed on page 6 prior to contacting any of the groups which have been identified. Some groups, particularly hard-to-reach groups, may require special support and encouragement, particularly those who may have limited interaction with the County Council. Accessibility is also essential, so that no participant is excluded because of lack of physical access to meeting places, timing, etc.

4.0 How can we engage?

The County Council’s Consultation and Engagement Framework includes a number of key principles that must be adhered to when communicating with the public, so it is essential that all officers and members involved in engagement exercises are familiar with these before commencing this stage of the engagement process.

What methods of engagement can be used?

The County Council’s Consultation and Engagement Methods Toolkit provides a wide range of different methods of communication, participation and engagement with the public. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses; the key is to select the right one for the particular purpose and context of the scrutiny topic, rather than choosing one method as a ‘favourite’ or just for the sake of doing something different.

For this stage of the process, it is essential that careful consideration is given to selecting the most appropriate methods, depending on:

- The nature and content of the scrutiny review

- The aim and objective of public engagement in the scrutiny review
- The participant groups to be involved, e.g. stakeholder, consumer
- Whether the engagement is to be open or selective

It will not be possible to undertake a number of the methods outlined in the Consultation and Engagement Methods Toolkit, due to the timescales and resources associated with Overview and Scrutiny processes; however, the Corporate Consultation Officer will be able to provide advice and support in selecting, preparing and running those methods which are feasible and appropriate. Once the consultation or engagement exercise has been planned, it should always be recorded on the County Council's Ask Warwickshire website.

How do we feed back to the community?

An engagement process, and the Group/Committee running that process, need to be accountable to all participants. This requires good record-keeping and reporting of both processes and outcomes, and actually sharing that information with the public, once the scrutiny topic or review had been completed.

There are various ways that outcomes can be fed back to the public and the most appropriate approach will depend on the participants who were involved:

- Specific community, voluntary or partner groups – direct communication via email/letter.
- Individual members of the public, i.e. members of the public who have attended a Committee meeting or were directly involved in the review process – direct communication via email/letter.
- The wider general public – social media and press releases.

While engaging individual groups, residents or businesses, it is worth asking for their preferred method of communication for feedback and reporting outcomes. The Localities and Partnerships team can assist sharing outcomes to the relevant groups via existing communication channels.

In addition, the Ask Warwickshire site is a useful tool that the County Council can inform the public about the consultation results and outcomes; therefore, these should be fed back to the Corporate Consultation Officer to input onto the Ask Warwickshire site.

What issues do we need to be aware of?

Public speaking has limited success at Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings, given the formality of the meeting and the time that they are held (10am). For greater success, public engagement exercises should be undertaken outside of and in addition to the Committee meetings, so that the invitation to speak to the Committee is not the only opportunity for public engagement on offer. For topics with significant public interest, the possibility of rescheduling the Committee meeting to an evening time, and perhaps a community venue, should be considered. It is also worth speaking to the Communications team, to ascertain whether a live feed could be used during the meeting, so that members of the public unable to attend the meeting can still have a level of participation.

In addition, it is important that members seek opportunities to go to the community, rather than inviting the community to Shire Hall. As well as encouraging greater participation, people are generally more open and responsive in their own surroundings, thereby making the engagement more valid and meaningful.

Finally, engagement should not be used without respect for participants. The fuel of engagement, particularly at meetings, is people's time. Members cannot take this time for granted and must ensure that everything possible is done to ensure that a participant's time is well spent. This means ensuring that the engagement process has focus and clarity of purpose, that participants' needs are fully aired and considered and that their level of influence in the process, i.e. what can or cannot be changed as a result of it, is clear from the start.

5.0 Public Engagement Flowchart

The following flowchart provides a step-by-step guide, which summarises each of the above sections in a series of questions/steps.

