

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE PARTNERSHIPS AND GOVERNANCE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOMS 2/3, CIVIC OFFICES ANGEL STREET BRIDGEND CF31 4WB ON TUESDAY, 5 APRIL 2016 AT 2.00 PM

Present

Councillor – Chairperson

E Dodd	EM Hughes	M Jones	JR McCarthy
HE Morgan	D Patel	RL Thomas	KJ Watts

Officers:

Mark Galvin	Senior Democratic Services Officer - Committees
Rachel Keepins	Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny

Invitees:

Councillor CE Smith	Cabinet Member Regeneration and Economic Development
PA Jolley	Assistant Chief Executive Legal and Regulatory Services
Gary Jones	Head of Democratic Services

36. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None

37. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

38. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of a meeting of the Partnerships and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee dated 14 January 2016, be approved as a true and accurate record.

39. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services submitted a report, the purpose of which, was to present the items due to be considered at the Committee's next meeting, to be held following the Annual meeting of Council.

The potential items to be considered at this meeting were shown in paragraph 4.1 of the report, whilst paragraph 4.2 outlined a further potential item for consideration by the Committee at a subsequent meeting.

The Scrutiny Officer added that Members would have an opportunity to look at potential further items, through a series of workshops that would be undertaken in the coming week specifically designed to compiling a Committees Forward Work Programme (FWP).

Other potential items Members put forward for the FWP were to revisit Crime and Disorder (including Sexual Exploitation) and the impact of this on legislation, the City Deal, partnership working involving Community Safety/Community Policing, partnership

working within Emergency Planning and governance issues with regard to any dissatisfaction with or complaints made against the Authority.

RESOLVED: That Members noted the items contained in the report for possible consideration at the next two scheduled meetings, together with the other further suggestions as detailed above.

40. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH SCRUTINY

The Chairperson welcomed to the meeting the Invitees.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services submitted a report, in order to advise Members of plans to develop public engagement with Scrutiny.

A Member noted that there were a considerable number of options in the report that could be pursued to improve public engagement regarding Scrutiny. However, he based on the fact that the Council had limited resources, what was the likely cost of the proposed options.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services confirmed that any likely costs to improve such engagement could not be estimated until such time that Members had decided what items they were going to pursue through the Forward Work Programme. He added that options such as voting pads were relatively inexpensive when compared with the costs associated with other options such as engagement events which would only be effective if you could guarantee that the public or organisational representatives would attend. .

A Member asked when voting pads had been used to which the Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services replied that these had been used to increase engagement with the public in meetings regarding the MTFs proposals.

A Member considered that the public would only really be interested in engaging on matters that directly affected them, such as Waste Collection changes and Council Tax increases etc.

A Member noted that the number of hits from the public from Committees web cast to date was highest for the first meeting which was the Development Control Committee. She suggested that the reason for this was that the Committee sometimes dealt with the more contentious issues or those of public interest such as planning applications.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services confirmed that planning applications did have a direct effect on the public, particularly the applicant and objectors etc. However, he felt that the public should also have greater interest than they have had in the Budget, as this impacted upon key services that affected them. However, public response to the engagement exercise carried out in respect of the MTFs for the forthcoming year had been poor.

The Cabinet Member Regeneration and Economic Development advised that there were a number of initiatives outlined in the report that if continued and pursued more actively, would improve public engagement and were relatively cost-free. In particular, students and younger people should be encouraged to use voting pads as well as social media. He questioned however how many members of the public were actually aware that they could sit in and observe meetings of Council and Cabinet which were high profile meetings, yet historically not much interest was shown in them through attendance by the public.

The Head of Democratic Services advised that in terms of encouraging the public to observe meetings of the Council, this could possibly be assisted by putting some appropriate wording to this effect on the Democratic Services Section part of the web site.

A Member advised that he still felt that the best method of engagement with the public regardless of what issue, was through the use of social media avenues, such as the internet and on-line facilities. He asked if there was any information available regarding data capture in terms of the public engaging with the Authority via different methods of social media, including if they gave their contact details. He suggested that that the Authority could use this to engage with them on future items of Council business that, and/or to advise them of up and coming public engagement events. He added that perhaps information advertising the opportunity for public engagement, including in respect of scrutiny and the area of Democratic Services, could be sent out in letters that occasionally go out to all residents, such as Council Tax bills.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services advised that the local authority were governed by legislative requirements to a degree in terms of what it could and couldn't do, however, this did not extend to requesting information from the public along the above lines.

A Member asked if the form of communication between the local authority and the Citizen's Panel was through written correspondence or electronically i.e. via email.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services replied that both these methods of communication were used. He added that there were in the region of 1,400 members on the Panel, and that one of the priorities for the Panel was to increase its size in terms of numbers, and as a result of that, look to expand methods of engagement.

A Member felt that a facility on the Modern.Gov database system to allow for members of the public to submit a request via the Internet for an E-Petition to be published on the web site, was not just an advantage for constituents, but would also be of benefit to local Members. A pivotal role of a Councillor included managing the expectations of local people with regard to key issues that affected the County Borough as well as the wider communities. He added that social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter were also a proven effective method of communicating with the public at large. The only drawback with sites such as these was that members of the public may ask the same or similar questions of the Council, as well as there being scope for emotive topical issues, particularly those which directly affected them personally. He asked if the local authority and the Citizen's Panel had any control over the misuse of these types of sites.

The Consultation and Engagement Manager confirmed that there was a Social Media Policy in existence and the provisions of this had to be complied with. A contravention of this Policy such as individuals using vulgar and/or abusive language when engaging with the Council through the use of social media would result in the Authority dis-engaging with that particular individual.

A Member noted that there had not been as much interest in the webcasted meeting of Council dated 10 March 2016 as there had been in certain other Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Cabinet dated 1 March 2016.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services confirmed that this was not necessarily surprising given the interaction between the overview and scrutiny process and Cabinet in their consideration of key service areas of the Authority.

Cabinet rather than Council also made the day to day decisions of the Authority, so the public were therefore likely to be more interested in these meetings.

A Member felt that the agenda for Council should be made more interesting in terms of its items, for example inviting questions to the Executive/Corporate Directors from members of the public.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services confirmed that there was provision for this in the Constitution should agreement be made to introduce this question/answer type session sometime in the future.

The Cabinet Member – Regeneration and Economic Development added that Council agendas are made more interesting when Members ask questions of the Cabinet and when Notices of Motion are received, and he encouraged Members to continue this practice.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services, further added that there was also a facility within the Constitution for quarterly debates to be considered at meetings of Council.

A Member referred to page 20 of the report and paragraph 4.7.4, and confirmed that he was pleased to note that an updated version of the Town/Community Council Charter was being introduced, whereby one of its proposals was that the Scrutiny Forward Work Programmes be made available to Town and Community Councils and discussed at quarterly meetings with their Clerks. He felt that this process would assist in corporate working and the sharing of key information that was of interest to the two tiers of Authority.

Members asked if the webcasting of meetings had stifled debate at all, and if there had been any feedback received in relation to Members participation to date.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services advised that he had both attended and observed some of the meetings that had been webcast, and he felt that it was noticeable that both Members and Officers had seem restrained in the first few broadcasted meetings. He felt that with time attendees had started to become more relaxed for the camera.

One of the benefits of webcasting meetings was that they were now more aligned to the agenda, and similarly that debate also followed a similar pattern. It was a learning curve for all, and he was confident that as Members and Officers become increasingly used to meetings being webcast, then this would benefit agenda business.

A Member felt that it would be of some benefit if topical items that originated from the Council, for example on the MTFs, and engaging with the public on this in terms of a consultation exercise, were added on to the back end of business of another community based forum such as PACT, BAVO or a Town and Community Council meeting. Times of meetings where there was such a proposal to engage with the public needed to be varied also he added, for such meetings to be held both in the day and the evening, in order to maximise attendance figures.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services agreed that this was a good suggestion as was the proposal to utilise avenues such as Social Media and the Council's web site even further. In terms of Overview and Scrutiny agenda items derived from the Committee's Forward Work Programme, it was important that these were meaningful and if possible, connected in some way to the Council's three key Corporate Priorities.

The Chairperson asked if the new Modern.Gov system had improved methods of sharing information of the Council on key issues with members of the public.

The Head of Democratic Services replied that the system had required some minor modifications and refinements in order to achieve this. For example through breaking information down more, adding information, and putting a general information page on the web site, explaining how the democratic processes of the Authority work, as well as giving information on meetings of Committees held and the decisions made by these bodies. Information was also available bilingually in accordance with the Welsh Language Standards. These changes would hopefully make the website more user friendly, and in turn, the public would take time to look at this (in terms of hits) more frequently than had previously been the case. He added that webcasting meetings alone had generated increased interest from the public in the business and decision making processes of the Council.

A Member referred to page 19 of the report and paragraph 4.5.2, where it referred to developing the integration of Twitter feeds into the webcast for Scrutiny meetings enabling the public to provide their views on the meetings whilst watching the live webcast. She raised some concern over tweets being made at the same time the meeting was being held.

The Head of Democratic Services confirmed that tweets would not be allowed during the course of meetings that involve firm decision making. However, in the case of Overview and Scrutiny meetings this could be allowed as these meetings drew up conclusions and recommendations as opposed to resolutions.

A Member referred to the development of the Scrutiny Forward Work Programmes and asked if there would be an opportunity for the Committee to look at the Member Referrals System in order to establish if there were any themes coming across within the referrals.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services confirmed that Member Referrals had dropped in terms of their number and therefore a review of the process was planned. He felt that trends with regard to corporate complaints could be examined through the scrutiny process should Members so wish.

A Member felt that a lot of complaints made to the Council were related to a reduction in services the Authority provided due to budget cuts. He felt that by engaging with the public and listening to what they had to say, this could have an influence or bearing as to where savings should be made within Directorates.

The Cabinet Member Economic Development and Regeneration advised that the Communities Directorate received the majority of referrals, and ironically, that Directorate had received the biggest hit in terms of budget cuts as a number of services they provided were not governed by statute.

Conclusions:

1. The Committee strongly supported the need to improve methods of engagement between Scrutiny and the public and felt that the first priority was to increase the knowledge and understanding of Scrutiny and ensure that methods of engagement provide clarification of the process to prevent any misinterpretation. An example was in relation to Webcasting which can sometimes be difficult to follow. Members proposed that during the introduction by the Chair the whole agenda is summarised so that anyone watching knows what is coming up in the meeting.

2. The Committee supported the proposal to use Webcasting to advertise future Scrutiny meetings and topics and proposed that this should be carried out during meetings that are usually of most interest to the public, such as Planning, where viewing figures are generally higher.
3. The Committee supported the development of online services such as webcasting, social media and updating the Scrutiny website to better engage and inform the public. The Committee agreed that priority and focus should be given to systems and methods the Council already have and progressing these first.
4. Following this, the Committee suggested that further developments in technology be explored to try to improve public engagement with Scrutiny such as:
 - a. Creating and maintaining an email database containing stakeholder emails that could be utilised for engagement and consultation;
 - b. Introducing a system that flags up Scrutiny related items when individuals are utilising or searching on the Council's website.
5. Whilst supporting the technological and digital initiatives being introduced, the Committee raised concern for those who do not have computer access or skills to access online information. Members recommended that further work be undertaken to consider how to reach these particular members of the public. Some suggestions were through notice boards, the Citizen Panel, postal questionnaires, maximising the potential of standard council literature that is regularly sent out and utilising activities and touchpoints already in place. Free newspapers and newsletters such as the Gem and the Seaside News were also put forward as examples of methods for promoting and advertising Scrutiny. Members also suggested using the public information screens in the foyer of the Civic Offices to - advertise and show Scrutiny meetings and items as these were relatively easy, cost effective methods of engaging the public.
6. Members strongly supported the proposal to engage Town and Community Councils and that their Members become ambassadors for Scrutiny. The Committee also proposed that Members have a bigger role to play as they are the public representatives who often engage with members of the public in their everyday role. The Committee recommended that Members be encouraged to raise the subject of Scrutiny and promote it through various activities that they are involved in such as other Committees, Boards, Trusts, Community groups, through which they can create an opportunity for engagement and advertising of Scrutiny.
7. Similarly Members proposed to engage with the public by utilising opportunities to seek opinion and input regarding Scrutiny at 'other meetings; attending other groups and organisations' meetings as was done during the budget consultation.
8. The Committee requested that more be done to promote the quarterly debate of Council.

Further Comments

The Committee requested that an exercise be carried out to – identify themes arising from Member Referrals and Corporate and Directorate Complaints in order that these can be used to inform the Scrutiny Forward Work Programmes. The Committee proposed that this process should be formalised in order to monitor feedback from the public and ensure that the Authority is learning from it.

41. NOMINATION TO STANDING BREP

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Regulatory Services submitted a report, the purpose of which was to seek nominations for the Budget Research and Evaluation Panel.

RESOLVED: That the following Members be nominated to sit on the BREP:-

Councillor N Clarke (Committee Chairperson)
Councillor D Patel

Reserve Member – KJ Watts

42. URGENT ITEMS

None

The meeting closed at 4.20 pm