

Report



Democratic Services Committee

Part 1

Date: 27th January 2023

Subject Participation Strategy: Ward Meetings

Purpose To consider the role of ward meetings under the Participation Strategy which was implemented by the Council in May 2022.
To make any comments on the proposed framework to support ward meetings.

Author Democratic and Electoral Services Manager

Ward City wide

Summary Under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 Local Authorities are required to publish a Participation Strategy that supports residents to become more involved in decision-making and to encourage more diversity in decision-makers.

Democratic Services Committee supported the development of the Strategy, which was adopted by the Council in May 2022.

Key objectives under this strategy include;

- (a) ways of promoting awareness among local people of the principal council's functions;
- (c) ways of facilitating access for local people to information about decisions made, or to be made, by the principal council;
- (d) ways of promoting and facilitating processes by which local people may make representations to the principal council about a decision before, and after, it is made;

Feedback from residents regarding the Strategy indicated that respondents felt that there was room to improve in terms of citizen engagement and involvement in the democratic process. Ward meetings are one of many ways that the Council is able to support public involvement in decision-making; defining an agreed framework for the ward meetings, including the support available for ward councillors will promote consistency and equality in line with the principle aims of the Participation Strategy.

The reinstatement of ward meetings also offers the opportunity for residents to raise items for discussion, supporting the aims of the Participation Strategy in listening to residents and empowering citizen's and communities to have their say on what matters for their local area.

Proposal To note the report and consider the proposed framework to support ward meetings prior to consideration by full Council

Action by Democratic Services Manager

Timetable

This report was prepared after consultation with:

- Head of Law and Regulation
- Chief Executive
- Directors
- Heads of Service

Background

In line with The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 the Council published a Participation Strategy in May 2022. The Council already has experience in participation, engagement, consultation and co-production. The expectation is that the Strategy will support the organisation to build on this experience and move towards greater participation over time.

The Act states that a public participation strategy must, in particular, address:

- (a) ways of promoting awareness among local people of the principal council's functions;
- (c) ways of facilitating access for local people to information about decisions made, or to be made, by the principal council;
- (d) ways of promoting and facilitating processes by which local people may make representations to the principal council about a decision before, and after, it is made;

The Strategy aims to be open and responsive to the needs of citizens and communities. This includes engaging local people in participative processes, by which residents can influence and shape policy and services.

Participation is about sharing decisions with those affected by them and must be an integral part of the Council's work. Whilst participation is not about giving groups or individuals whatever they ask for, residents should always have a degree of decision-making power so that they feel listened to and understood.

Participation supports residents to be 'actively involved with policy makers and service planners from an early stage of policy and service planning and review' (Participation Cymru, 2012). Participation should include a wide range of different methods and techniques. Feedback from the consultation on the Participation Strategy indicated that the public would like the Council to be visible to residents, to explore alternative methods of consultation and to ask residents what matters to them.

The Strategy requires the Council to openly share information with residents about the Council's functions, not just when the public are being asked to make a decision. Regular updates and discussions help to make sure people living in Newport have the opportunity to digest and explore information before they may be asked to give their opinion or recommendations.

As public participation is a challenging aspect of council business, it is expected that this strategy will evolve and improve over time as the benefit of experience and good practice becomes evident.

Ward meetings

The 'Practitioners' Manual for Public Engagement' (Participation Cymru, 2012) defines consultation as '*a formal process by which policy makers and service providers ask for the views of interested groups and individuals*'. Ward meetings clearly meet the definition of participation under this standard.

Ward meetings were previously held within communities, at the request of elected members, with senior officer and administrative support. Ward meetings did not have a standard framework and ran on an ad-hoc basis, with varied agendas.

Whilst ward meetings offer a valuable opportunity to engage with residents, the inconsistent approach to their content meant that the exchange of information varied depending on location. Adopting a standard framework to support ward meetings will establish a consistent and holistic approach to engaging with communities under the public participation strategy, while making the best use of limited resources. This approach will support the aims of the Participation Strategy by sharing key information about the Council and council service provision, and by engaging with residents on key decisions that will impact their communities in a timely manner.

Through discussion with the Democratic Services Committee in 2022, the feedback from elected members highlighted the key features that they considered to be an essential part of the arrangements for ward meetings. The Committee agreed that it was important to have the option to hold ward meetings on a regular basis to provide the opportunity to engage with residents. Members felt that retaining the option to hold three meetings per year would be beneficial, and that support in promoting the meetings beforehand would promote wider awareness in the community. However, Committee Members also recognised the resource required to support ward meetings must be balanced against the economic challenges facing all local authorities. The Committee welcomed the opportunity to develop and strengthen participative engagement with the community on important conversations, including setting the budget and reflecting on performance, but emphasised the requirement for communities to set their own agenda for discussion. The Committee requested that the proposed framework and support be reconsidered with this feedback in mind.

Framework and Support

Formalising the approach to ward meetings will ensure a consistent and equitable approach to the dialogue for residents in all wards, supporting the aims of the participation strategy.

Over the cycle of the municipal year, there are key corporate decisions such as budget setting and the medium term financial plan that the Council routinely engages with citizens on. Methods of engagement include consultation that can be accessed online, and as a gateway to the public Wi-Fi available across the City. Utilising one of the regular ward meetings to focus on budget setting and supporting residents to engage with this process on a face-to-face basis will encourage rich and meaningful feedback that shapes the outcome

of the decisions being made. The budget setting cycle would require the ward meeting to take place in January to support the collection of meaningful feedback to inform the decision making process. Nonetheless, it is recognised that providing the opportunity for residents to set points for discussion is important, so the agenda would include the budget setting process, and topics raised for discussion by the community through their elected representatives.

In addition, a second supported ward meeting approximately six months after the budget setting ward meeting would provide a further opportunity to promote awareness of the Council's functions including a summary of progress against key objectives and projects. Again, the agenda would also include items raised by residents for discussion.

Two ward meetings per ward on an annual basis would potentially be forty-two in total that would be supported by officers. Based on feedback from Democratic Services Committee, Members would have the option of holding a third meeting but there would be limitations on the officer support due to the volume of meetings involved and the investment of officer time this represents.

Administrative support to schedule and arrange up to three ward meetings per year will be provided via Democratic Services. Further administrative support will be provided by officers from across the Council at two meetings per year, to ensure that feedback from residents is recorded and collated centrally to support consultation and feed into the decision-making process. Support from Senior Officers will also be provided to ward members at two ward meetings per year. This will be on a pre-planned, rostered basis so that there is appropriate assistance whilst continuing to support the work-life balance of officers when working outside of usual office hours. Where Members wish to hold a third meeting, administrative support would be provided for booking suitable venues within communities for ward meetings, but there would be no officer support at the meetings.

Support in promoting up to three ward meetings would be provided, to include promotion via social media accounts, Newport Matters and limited amounts of posters produced to a set template.

Whilst the proposed framework would support meetings in each ward if required, it would remain within the remit of the ward member/s to determine whether the ward meetings are held in their own community. Members may prefer to communicate with their residents in a different way, and in this case are not obliged to hold ward meetings. However, for those wards who want the meetings, then this is a consistent way of organising and structuring the meetings.

Ad-hoc meetings concerning specific issues arising affecting communities would be considered on a case by case basis.

The Ward Meeting framework does not replace other methods of engagement with communities that are open to Councillors, such as ward surgeries, casework, emails or social media, for example.

This framework will support the development of more participative decision making with the community whilst balancing the resource requirements needed to provide appropriate support. The proposed framework balances the aims of the Participation Strategy in engaging citizens in important conversations and empowering them to set part of the agenda themselves.

Consultation

Statutory consultation concerning the Participation Strategy was open for 30 days in February and March 2022.

The feedback received as part of the consultation supported the actions outlined in the strategy to encourage participation. The full response to the consultation can be found in Appendix B. The responses to questions and comments feedback indicates that residents are interested in the decisions that the Council makes, and would welcome having more of a voice as part of the decision making process. The feedback gathered as additional comments in the responses indicate that respondents felt that there was room to improve in terms of citizen engagement and involvement in the democratic process. The respondents felt that the actions outlined in the strategy would help residents to become more involved in decision making. The insights gained through the additional comments indicate that residents would like engagement to focus on more varied and alternative methods of communication, particularly with potentially harder to reach groups.

Financial Summary

There are no direct financial implications associated with the proposed framework.

Risks

Risk	Impact of Risk if it occurs* (H/M/L)	Probability of Risk occurring	What is the Council doing or what has it done to avoid the risk or reduce it's effect	Who is responsible for dealing with the Risk?
Failure to meet the legislative requirements set out in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 to support residents to be actively involved in democratic processes	H	L	Participation Strategy has been adopted by the Council and this will be developed to increase transparency and engagement with residents	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Failure to support residents to participate via ward meetings in a fair and equitable way	H	L	Framework in place to support consistent approach to ward meetings	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager

*Taking account of proposed mitigation measures.

Links to Council Policies and Priorities

Whilst the Corporate Plan is still in development at the time of preparing this report, the Participation Strategy will be embedded as part of the Corporate Plan. This will be reflected throughout the strategic plans, right down to the service plans in each area.

Other Council strategies and plans that link closely to this work are The Strategic Equality Plan 2020-24 and the Newport Well-being Plan 2017-22. The commonality with the Equality Plan is involving local people in the decisions that affect them, considering diverse needs when developing services and helping people to feel connected to the place that they live.

The goals that the Strategy shares with the Newport Well-being Plan relate to Sustainable Development principles under the Wellbeing and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Specifically, Involving People and developing solutions in partnership with local people and communities, and ensuring they are involved in decisions that affect them. The aim under the Well-being Plan is that people and communities are friendly, confident and empowered to improve their well-being. This plan is also currently under revision but will continue to support the principles of the Wellbeing and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

Options Available and Considered

1. Approve the framework and endorse it for recommendation at Council
2. Do not approve the framework or endorse it for recommendation at Council

Preferred Option and Why

Option 1. The Committee is asked to note the report, and approve the ward meeting framework for adoption.

Comments of Chief Financial Officer

There will be no adverse budgetary impact as a result of these proposals, the proposed framework to support ward meetings will be fully funded through existing budgets. Any further development to this level of support would require additional budget or grant to be identified so that the support remains fully funded.

Comments of Monitoring Officer

The proposed action is in accordance with the Council's statutory duty under section 39 of the Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021 to encourage local people to participate in decision-making. The proposed framework for ward meetings is also consistent with the Council's Participation Strategy, under section 40 of the Act, and the promotion of increased public engagement and consultation.

Neighbourhood Committees were originally introduced by the Council in the 1990's and, at the time, this was an innovative approach to engaging with the public in the local ward areas. The meetings were formal in nature and organised on traditional committee lines, with the senior ward member chairing the meeting and published agendas and minutes. However, they were never decision-making bodies and therefore not strictly Council "committees". Over time, the role of the Neighbourhood Committees changed significantly, particularly with the development of Executive governance arrangements and advancements in technology, with more effective ways of communicating and engaging with much larger numbers of local residents. Following a review in 2011, the structured arrangements for quarterly Neighbourhood Committee meetings in each ward were changed to a more flexible approach to ward meetings. The meetings were held at times and at venues agreed with the ward Councillors, supported by senior officers, who also set the topics for discussion at the public meetings. There were no longer any formal agendas reports or minutes and the ward meetings were conducted on a more informal basis, as a means of engagement and

communication with the public. Although there was a limit of three ward meetings in any calendar year, it was left to the discretion of the members in each ward as to how and when any meetings were arranged, if at all.

Prior to the suspension of ward meetings during the Covid-19 lock-down period, some wards held ward meetings on a regular basis, others only held meetings in response to specific issues, for example as part of a consultation exercise. Some wards did not use ward meetings at all, as they found that other communication methods with their residents were more effective.

This proposal would involve the reintroduction of discretionary ward meetings, but on a more structured basis and in accordance with the new Participation Strategy. Where ward members wish to hold ward meetings, then they will focus on key areas of consultation and participatory decision making, namely the budget and delivery of the corporate plan and well-being objectives. However, the ward meetings are only one of a number of tools available to elected members and the Council to engage with residents and, where other methods of consultation are considered to be more effective, then residents in those areas will receive the same information and opportunities to respond. Therefore, ward members will still have the choice of whether or not to hold these consultation meetings in their wards.

Comments of People, Policy and Transformation

The Council's Participation Strategy aims to strengthen engagement with residents, increase their involvement in decision making and their understanding of the democratic process. The particular focus is the relationship between Ward members and the Council as a democratic body and local people. This report outlines a framework for consistent and supported Ward meetings across the local authority area. It also sets out a focus for Ward Meetings, centred around the budget setting process which had previously only engaged with a relatively small proportion of the population in a centralised manner. The introduction of face-to-face ward meetings will complement the increasing use of electronic forms of public engagement helping ensure the Council is inclusive of more societal and equalities groups and avoiding digital exclusion.

Local Issues

Not applicable.

Equalities Impact Assessment and the Equalities Act 2010

A fairness and equalities impact assessment has been drafted and will be updated following further consultation.

Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

The support framework supports the development of A More Equal Wales; achieving more diversity and inclusion in the voices that are heard in decision-making will help to reduce inequalities. The Strategy does not adversely affect any of the other Well-being Goals for Wales.

The Strategy supports The Well-being Plan 2018-23 objective;

3) People and communities are friendly, confident and empowered to improve their well-being

This will be supported through working with residents and communities to develop solutions and empowering the community as part of the decision making process.

The Strategy supports the Equality Plan 2020-2024 objectives;

1. Leadership, Governance and Involvement.
2. Community Cohesion

By supporting residents to be involved in making the decisions that affect them, considering diverse needs when developing services and helping people to feel connected to the place that they live.

The framework supports the long-term development of better engagement and involvement of residents over time so that it continues to meet the changing needs of local people.

Consultation

Full details of public consultation are outlined in an earlier section of this report. Consultation concerning the proposed strategy will be open for 30 days commencing in October 2022.

Background Papers

- <https://www.newport.gov.uk/documents/Council-and-Democracy/Participation-Strategy-Final-Format.pdf>
- [The Strategic Equality Plan 2020-2024](#)
- [Well-being Plan 2018-2023](#)

Appendices

Appendix A

Responses to Consultation



Consultation
Results Participator