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CITY COUNCIL



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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Committee Report

Public

Date of Meeting: 13 March 2003

Title: DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT BEST VALUE REVIEW: SCOPING
REPORT

Report of: Head of Strategic and Performance Services

Report reference:

Summary:

This report provides a revised Scoping Report for the Democratic Engagement Best Value Review, including an appendix detailing academic research and best practice. The Committee is asked to examine whether the questions detailed in section three of the report provide an adequate starting point for the review.

Recommendation:

The Committee approves the scoping paper, subject to any comments, suggestions and amendments proposed.

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Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers: None

Democratic Engagement Best Value Revised Scoping Report

1. Introduction:

Carlisle City Council's Corporate Plan 2002-05 commits to three objectives of direct relevance to this Best Value Review:

CO1 Encourage community participation and inclusion in the Carlisle area

CM3 To develop our community planning process to ensure it addresses the aspirations and needs of our local communities

CM4 To reinvigorate democracy and improve voter turnout at elections.

2. Background:

Several pieces of work either completed or being carried out by the City Council, relate to this Review and will be considered by the team. These include: Supporting Communities Best Value Review; Consultation with Citizens; Electoral Campaigns; Implementing Electronic Government and Area working.

3. Key Areas and questions:

The Review can be divided into six key areas, addressing the following questions:

Access:

- 1) Why do people not attend City Council meetings and what can be done to encourage them to attend?
- 2) What do those people who do attend think of them?
- 3) How can the meetings be made more relevant to the public?
- 4) What have other authorities done to increase interaction with the public?

Policy:

- 1) Are we fulfilling our responsibility to consult?
- 2) Are we being sufficiently imaginative in the methods of consultation we use?
- 3) Do other authorities use referenda and is this method appropriate in Carlisle?
- 4) Do those people currently consulted feel their views help to shape policy?

Interaction:

- 1) Do the public believe they have good access to their Councillors and how can it be improved?
- 2) Is area working of relevance?
- 3) Which are the most effective ways Councillors communicate with people?
- 4) Is there a suitable mechanism to enhance the role back-benchers fulfill?

Youth:

- 1) How can the workings of the City Council be made more relevant to young people?
- 2) How can the views of young people be used to help shape policy?
- 3) What role can we play in the teaching of Citizenship in schools?

Engagement:

- 1) Which other groups are we failing to engage with?

Elections:

- 1) How can we remove barriers to voting?
- 2) What have other authorities done to raise registration and turnout?

4. Terms of Reference:

The Review will, in summary, address the following points:

- How can the City Council engage better with its citizens?
- What can we do to improve turnout at local elections?
- What can we do to engage young people and other disengaged groups?
- How can we make City Council meetings and the decision-making process more interesting?
- How can we consult more effectively on policy matters?

5. Involvement:

Members will have an important contribution to make in this Review as well as officers from, mainly, four Business Units: Legal and Democratic Services; Strategic and Performance Services; Member Support and Employee Services and Economic and Development Services.

March 2003

How to Improve Democratic Engagement

A Best Value Review of Democratic Engagement is appropriate and timely. It is acknowledged that the review will be most effective if it focuses on a few areas where a real difference can be made.

The subject is a topical one and there is a body of work that would assist the team undertaking the review. This document provides details of a few of those studies which demonstrate that there are actions that Carlisle City Council could take to improve its democratic engagement with its citizens.

Schools and Young People

The development of the Citizenship component of national curriculum provides a mechanism for every local authority to engage with school children. This is particularly the case since schools are still developing their approach to this subject.

Further, there is a growing body of work on the engagement of young people. This includes:

- **Involving Young People in Decision Making – A Survey of Local Authorities** carried out by the Local Government Association and the Institute for Public Policy Research. This research describes the different mechanisms used by local authorities attempting to engage with young people. The study found that although nearly 80% of authorities are trying to involve young people in decision making, only 30% are evaluating the process. One of the main findings of this research was that the involvement of young people was more successful when training was undertaken.
- **Young people and politics – A report on the Yvote?/Ynot? Project** by the Government's Children and Young People's Unit. This study aims to reveal why young people are not voting by asking them. The report includes recommendations for the different groups of people involved – to politicians, to the media and to the Government. The key messages to politicians were (i) Talk to us in language we can understand (ii) Talk to us directly, regularly and in our environments (iii) Listen and respond to our concerns (iv) Respect our diversity.

- **Politics not Parties – Young People and Political Engagement –** Findings from a series of discussion groups with young people. This IPPR study focused particularly on local engagement and detailed a number of suggestions for greater involvement of young people. For example, Youth Councils were, generally, endorsed by young people, but Issues Groups (set up specially to discuss a given issue) were less favourably received. Other points emphasised were that there was a need to ensure that there is no stigma attached to being involved and also to avoid situations where young people might feel intimidated.
- **Understanding youth participation in local government: A Qualitative Study.** This report includes a number of recommendations derived from talking to young people – these are primarily based around informing young people about politics; making politicians more representative of and accountable to young people; and creating more opportunities for young people to participate in the political process. The opportunities most favoured were youth forums, drop in centres and question and answer sessions with local councillors. Most importantly, however, these initiatives need to offer genuine opportunities for young people to express their views and influence local authority decisions. Finally, it is important to recognise that it will take at least 10 to 20 years before there may be measurable impacts of the range of different activities being undertaken.
- **Voter Engagement and Young People.** This report went into areas beyond those apparent from the title and considered young people's attitudes to parties and politics as well as voting.

Also, the Local Government Association and the National Youth Agency have published the **Hear by Right** standards which set out what local authorities should aim for in actively involving and engaging young people in democracy.

Relatively few Best Value Reviews have explicitly tackled youth engagement – one of the examples is the review by Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council into Devolution and Community Engagement that explicitly considered “the engagement of young people in decision making”. Amongst other things, this review established the rights and responsibilities of young people in a Kirklees Young Citizens Plan. However, it is interesting to note that the Audit Commission inspection concluded that: “The structure of the meetings is still too formal and despite the best intentions of committee chairs, this restricts the ability of the community to contribute. Meetings held in traditional civic buildings and managed in such a formal way are unlikely to lead to effective engagement with numerous community groups, particularly young people.”

Consultation and Communication

The trend towards greater consultation by local authorities is a strong one. But consultation must be meaningful and have clear aims and objectives. It is also important to assess the effectiveness of that consultation. There is always a risk that consultation that is carried out in an ad hoc way will bring further disengagement from the public as they become more cynical about the purpose of consultation.

Wyre Borough Council carried out a review of Community Engagement – the Inspection report stressed that the council needed to develop a systematic approach to evaluate its community engagement activities: in particular, the council should be asking themselves the following:

- What are we seeking to achieve?
- What difference will it make to local people?
- How will we know when we've achieved it?

Many local authorities use a consultation strategy to define their approach to consultation and ensure that it is carried out properly.

Electoral Aspects

Although electoral turnout is only one part of the review, it is the area in which there is the greatest amount of recent research. It also remains the case that the Corporate Plan includes a target of increasing electoral turnout to 38% by May 2004.

Electoral services in other authorities have been the subject of some Best Value Reviews and the Electoral Commission has produced a number of helpful documents:

- **Best Value and Electoral Services: guidance on the review process, benchmarking and good practice for electoral administrators** makes use of the reviews which have already been carried out by some authorities. As the title suggests, it provides comprehensive advice on how to carry out an effective best value review of electoral services.

- **Making an impact – local promotion of electoral issues.** The report, which draws on the results of a questionnaire sent to local authorities, as well as focus groups and a series of consultation exercises, recommends that local authorities work with local schools, universities, businesses in the promotion of voter participation.

Professor Gaber, one of the authors of the report, says: "The research has shown that by making full use of a wide range of communications tools and by sharing best practice, local authorities can make a difference to levels of electoral registration and turnout."

- **Modernising Elections: A Strategic Evaluation of the 2002 electoral pilot schemes.**

Best Value reviews of electoral services have been carried out by Darlington Borough Council, Kingston Upon Thames, Ryedale District Council and Wyre Borough Council. These reviews have put in place a number of mechanisms that support an improvement in electoral turnout and the inspections of these reviews have supported these and, in some cases, identified further improvements that could be made. Amongst the improvements made were better access for elderly and disabled voters, a more proactive approach to postal voting and a co-ordinated communication strategy to improve participation in local democracy. There was also recognition of the potential for greater partnership working in this area.

Conclusion

In summary, there are a number of recent, useful studies that could assist in carrying out this Best Value Review. Some of these provide a national perspective on a topic whilst others offer detailed guidance on changes that can be made by local authorities.