

Committee: **Council**

Date of Meeting: **18th July, 2024**

Report Subject: **Blaenau Gwent Engagement & Participation Strategy**

Portfolio Holder: **Councillor Stephen Thomas, Leader/Cabinet Member
Corporate & Performance**

Report Submitted by: **Sarah King, Head of Governance, Partnerships &
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Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
	06/06/24				27/06/24		18/07/24	

1. Purpose of the Report

To consider the Engagement and Participation Strategy 2024/28.

2. Scope and Background

Our previous engagement strategy document, 'Our Approach to Engagement' has concluded and a new approach needs to be developed and implemented. As well as this, we have a statutory requirement within the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, to publish our intentions regarding how we intend to participate with the people of Blaenau Gwent.

The two elements have been combined into one strategy document to streamline and mainstream engagement and participation across the Council. The Strategy sets out why we need to engage, who with and how we will achieve this. We will use the same principle for the participation element, although this will be more specific to address the requirements detailed in section 4 of this report to ensure that local people are able to participate in the making of decisions by the council.

In January 2024, the Corporate and Performance Scrutiny Committee endorsed a draft Engagement & Participation Strategy for consultation, to gather people's views on our suggested approach and objectives. There were four main objectives set out in the draft Strategy, as well as a detailed Action Plan:

1. To mainstream effective engagement and participation approaches across the Council.
2. To ensure that we engage with the people of Blaenau Gwent in the most effective, collaborative way.
3. To actively encourage our communities & future generations to participate in council decision-making activity.

4. To maintain best practice in engagement & participation and keep up to date with the latest innovations to help support our communities.

Public consultation ran through March and April 2024, with 170 responses received. More detail about the responses received during this consultation are provided in section 6.3 and in Appendix 1. An updated final version of the Engagement & Participation Strategy and the supporting Action Plan are provided at Appendix 2.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

Corporate and Performance Scrutiny Committee considered the report on 27 June 2024, and agreed the recommendation for Council approval, making specific recommendations to strengthen the supporting action plan and approach building on the findings of the consultation, which were:

- (a) The Council considers to a trial whereby a meeting(s) be held later in day; and
- (b) A working group be established with appropriate elected member involvement to continue to ascertain and develop how the public would like to see the Council engaging in communities.

Option 1 –The Council approve the proposed Engagement & Participation Strategy 2024-28.

Option 2 –The Council approve the proposed Engagement & Participation Strategy 2024-28, including the recommendation(s) noted by Scrutiny for the supporting action plan.

Option 3 –The Council does not approve the proposed Engagement & Participation Strategy 2024-28.

4. **Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Statutory Responsibilities**

The Corporate Plan 2022/27 sets out that the community of Blaenau Gwent is at the heart of everything the Council does. Engagement, participation and customer experience feature as a key theme which runs across the Council in order to shape services and make decisions.

We are committed to engage effectively and this is underpinned by a range of legislation including the:

- The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015
- The Equality Act 2010, - The Welsh Language Measure 2011
- Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 – wherein we must address,

- a) ways of promoting awareness among local people of the principal council's functions;
- b) ways of promoting awareness among local people of how to become a member of the principal council, and what membership entails;

- 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;
- e) arrangements made, or to be made, for the purpose of the council's duty in section 62 of the 2011 Measure (bringing views of the public to attention of overview and scrutiny committees);
- f) ways of promoting awareness among members of the principal council of the benefits of using social media to communicate with local people.

5. Implications Against Each Option

5.1 ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

Whilst there are no direct costs associated with the adoption of an Engagement & Participation Strategy, the commitments within the strategy will utilise existing staff resources to develop and deliver engagement activity.

The publication and translation of the Strategy, on behalf of the Council, is met within existing Governance, Partnership & Democratic Services budgets.

5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

Failure to develop an Engagement and Participation Strategy would lead to the council not complying with its' obligations under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

This risk has been mitigated by developing the Objectives and the supporting action plan (with prioritised actions), and by ensuring ongoing delivery across the Council throughout the lifetime of the Strategy.

5.3 ***Legal***

Failure to develop an Engagement and Participation Strategy would lead to the council not complying with its' obligations under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

5.4 ***Human Resources***

There is a duty across the organisation to comply with the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act and proactively support the implementation of an Engagement & Participation Strategy. The Governance, Partnerships & Democratic Services of Corporate Services will oversee delivery and implementation via the Service Managers for Policy & Partnerships and Performance & Democratic Services.

Ongoing compliance, training and development may also be required during the life of the Strategy to successfully embed the engagement framework across all Council Directorates.

6. Supporting Evidence

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

To enable effective monitoring of the impact of the Engagement and Participation Strategy, monitoring of key metrics and performance measures relating to increased engagement and participation are outlined in the Action Plan appended to the Strategy. Progress updates will be reported to the Committee through progress reports and a review at the end of the Strategy's term.

6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

It is anticipated that there will be an improvement in the public interest in the workings of the council, especially concerning the decision-making process. There is an expectation that the public will have an improved understanding of council business, as well as a greater direct contribution to the democratic process.

6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

A consultation on the draft Engagement & Participation Strategy (approved by Scrutiny Committee in January 2024) was carried out during March and April 2024.

A significant majority of respondents either 'liked' or 'really liked' the four objectives in the draft strategy, many adding support for simple, easy to understand language when consulting the public via a variety of engagement methods, including a mix of online and face to face, in their general comments.

Other common themes from the general engagement emerging from the general comments to be considered through the Action Plan included:

- Targeted engagement with young people, older people, the digitally excluded and hard to reach communities.
- Providing and acting on feedback from consultations and engagement activity e.g. 'You said, we did...' communications.
- Availability of hard copy surveys, leaflets and consultation documents where possible.
- Optimise timing of face-to-face engagement activity or online meetings to ensure working people can participate.
- Ensuring a consistent, easy to understand engagement approach is used by all departments across the Council.
- Making use of the Community Hubs as an opportunity for people to take part in engagement activity.

There were also some more negative comments received about the number of surveys and consultation exercises carried out (consultation fatigue) and a perception that the Council doesn't listen to responses.

Some common themes for participation emerging from the consultation responses to be considered through the Action Plan included:

- Optimise timing of committee meetings to ensure working people can participate.

- Providing more information about the decision-making process and decisions or outcomes from committee meetings via communications channels.
- Increased opportunities for people to engage directly with councillors, either face-to-face or via online MS Teams or Zoom meetings.
- Encourage people to participate in local democracy, with 80-90% of respondents wanting to see 'more' opportunities to find out how the Council works and attend, watch, speak or submit questions to Committee meetings.
- Some interest in learning more about the role of a County Borough Councillor and how to become one in future.

There were also some more negative comments received evidencing some misconceptions about the role and salary of a Councillor, which could be addressed through a continued targeted myth busting communications campaign and information with the resident survey to raise awareness.

Additional data from the consultation process is provided in Appendix 1.

6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

The strategy will take consideration of the data and future trend information in terms of increasing levels of engagement and participation in democratic processes. An enhanced, more coordinated engagement framework can enable richer public engagement on what local people consider would make the area a better place for the future and have most positive impact on their well-being. Increased levels of participation will help ensure future generations continue to participate in local government decision-making.

The objectives will be in place until 2027/28 and will be monitored annually to review progress and ensure that the Strategy remains fit for purpose.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

The Corporate Plan considers prevention as one of the five ways of working under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act. The Engagement & Participation Strategy takes preventative action to help achieve the objectives via a commitment to engage on decisions impacting the long-term future of Blaenau Gwent and encouraging involvement in local democracy amongst future generations.

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

The strategy supports collaborative working with partners and stakeholders like Town & Community Councils, Trade Unions, and Public Services Board partner organisations.

The Council's Engagement Team are active members of several regional and national networks, designed to develop and share best practice and ensure that our engagement and participation activities focus on economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being outcomes, whilst local and regional partner organisations are and will be involved in shaping Engagement Forums.

6.7 *Integration (across service areas)*

The corporate engagement and participation framework needs to be shaped by elected members and must be integrated and embedded across all council service areas to ensure a consistent approach to engaging with our residents, community groups, and businesses. This will be an ongoing approach throughout the development and delivery of the strategy.

6.8 *Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions*

There are no decarbonisation or carbon considerations for this report.

6.9 *Integrated Impact Assessment (IAA)*

The IIA for the Strategy is included at Appendix 3. The assessment process identified no adverse impacts to be mitigated against.

7. *Monitoring Arrangements*

7.1 Review reports will be taken through the democratic process via the Corporate and Performance and Democratic Services Scrutiny Committees where appropriate.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- Appendix 1: Consultation response data summary
- Appendix 2: Engagement & Participation Strategy 2024/25 – 2027/28
- Appendix 3: Integrated Impact Assessment