

<b>MEETING</b>	<b>Corporate Scrutiny Committee</b>
<b>DATE</b>	<b>16/06/2016</b>
<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>Gwynedd Challenge Engagement</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>Identify good practice and areas for improvement for any future engagement exercise</b>
<b>AUTHORS</b>	<b>Councillor John Wyn Williams Councillor R H Wyn Williams (the representatives of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee who undertook the work)</b>
<b>RELEVANT OFFICER</b>	<b>Vera Jones Democratic Services Manager</b>

## **1. Background**

- 1.1. The Corporate Scrutiny Committee has identified the importance of engagement at its annual meeting, and is very eager to scrutinise the work. Over the past months and years the Engagement Strategy has been scrutinised many times, and the Scrutinisers felt that they were not adding value by re-visiting the strategy.
- 1.2 It was decided that the best way of examining such an enormous, complex and important matter was by identifying a specific piece of engagement work, and scrutinising that to see if there were lessons to be learned to enable the Council to do better next time, or share lessons of good practice across the Council as a whole. Several different sensitive matters were considered, e.g. libraries, car parks, etc. but in the end it was concluded that a full scrutiny investigation was not going to be of most benefit to the Council.
- 1.3 Following discussions at the preparatory meetings, and with Council officers, it was decided to contact the Gwynedd Engagement Group in order to see if it was possible to scrutinise the large amount of recent engagement work undertaken for the Gwynedd Challenge, but by doing so in a different way.

## **2. Challenging the Gwynedd Challenge Exercise to learn lessons**

- 2.1 The meeting of the Engagement Group was held on 5 April and, at that meeting, the Group was taking stock of the Gwynedd Challenge exercise to see what lessons could be learned regarding the Council's engagement arrangements more generally. Councillors John Wyn Williams and R H Wyn Williams were present at the meeting and there was a very open and honest discussion about the Gwynedd Challenge Exercise. The main conclusions were:-
  - I. On the whole, the exercise was very successful. It was a unique and ambitious venture and the Council should be applauded for venturing to seek the opinion of residents on matters that were both important and complex. Although some had expressed their disappointment at the number who had responded, the number was excellent considering the complexity of the subject and also the investment of time involved in taking part, and compared favourably with the response to comparable exercises conducted by other councils.
  - II. It is unlikely that the Council will undertake such a thorough exercise again for some years, but there are lessons to be learned that would be useful when planning an engagement exercise in the next few years.

- III. a) It is important to be clear what the purpose of the engagement is and to be open and honest with the public about that.  
b) There is room to re-examine the Engagement Handbook to ensure that it asks the question "Why are you thinking about engagement?" in order to avoid a situation where the Council engages on a matter on which it does not have a completely open mind.  
c) It is necessary to be clear as to which options, if at all, are on the table and that question should be asked before beginning any engagement activity.

The work of updating the handbook is already in progress, and the intention is to update it by the end of Quarter 1 2016/17

- IV. Good work has been undertaken to get internal feedback from staff in order to learn lessons from the process. However, it is believed that the opportunity should also be taken to ask residents if they took part in the Gwynedd Challenge, and asking - "If not, why not?", and if yes, "How was the experience?"
- V. It appears that the development of the on-line tool has enabled the Council to reach a broader range of the population than traditional methods. Therefore, that is something to build upon.
- VI. One of the possible weaknesses was that some of the content provided by the services were difficult for the public to understand and used complex language and too many "Council terms" that the public could not understand (in Welsh and in English). The inability to communicate clear and simple messages is a weakness that needs to be examined. Perhaps there is room here for work by a Scrutiny Investigation or Task Group to look at how this could be improved.
- VII. A number of changes were made to the direction of the work as it progressed. This was a little troublesome, but it was also a positive thing, as it showed a willingness to change and adapt as the work progressed. It is obvious that there are lessons to be learned in terms of trying to plan the work in advance to the best of our ability, but, as a Council, as officers and members, we have to be willing and flexible in terms of implementation and be willing to change direction along the way.
- VIII. The challenge of engaging effectively is a continuous one and one that the Public Services Board will have to address in terms of carrying out a dialogue with Gwynedd and Anglesey residents. The development of those arrangements needs to be followed very closely in order to avoid duplication and try to identify ways of utilising existing groups to hear the voices that usually don't speak up in public consultations.

Therefore, the main conclusion in terms of Scrutiny is that the exercise was a great success. In addition to that, the willingness of the Engagement Group to look openly and critically at the work and learn lessons from it shows a clear commitment to continually looking to improve our engagement arrangements.

### **3. Lessons to be learned in terms of Scrutiny**

The above exercise was a new and different exercise in terms of scrutiny, and therefore there is a need to try to assess whether there were strengths and/or weaknesses to these arrangements in order to be able to come to a conclusion on whether this kind of scrutiny exercise could be used in the future, and in different fields.

## STRENGTHS

- Utilising an existing 'forum' to avoid duplication
- The group was open to a constructive challenge from the scrutinisers and willing to discuss openly and honestly with everyone
- The attitude of the scrutinisers was to try to improve the engagement service for the future (attending to complain and assign blame would not have worked as well)
- A timely, quick exercise with findings submitted in a short timescale
- A small team of scrutinisers - easier to get everyone together

## WEAKNESSES

- It would need to be ensured that both sides were open and honest, with any observations focussing on improving service
- It would be essential to ensure that the matter is suitable for this kind of scrutiny, as members would not be expected to understand complex, technical matters in such a brief meeting.

The conclusion, therefore, is that the exercise in terms of scrutiny has been a successful one, where similar work in other areas could be attempted in future.