

NAME OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Corporate Scrutiny Committee
DATE OF MEETING	15 January 2015
TITLE	The Engagement Strategy
CABINET MEMBER	Councillor Ioan Thomas

1. Background and Context

- 1.1 The Corporate Scrutiny Committee has asked me to prepare a report on the Engagement Strategy following an indication given by me of the need to consider whether we can achieve all the issues highlighted in the Engagement Strategy within the original timetable.
- 1.2 I have been asked to respond to specific questions and the answers to these questions are listed below.

2. Questions asked by the Scrutiny Committee

2.1 Is there clarity regarding the requirements on the Council to be able to fulfil the Engagement Strategy?

The Engagement Strategy presented to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee on the 5th September 2013 suggested a work programme that could be achieved with the resources available (which was one officer to all interests and purposes).

This report is available at the address below and the original work programme can be seen at Appendix 1.

[https://www.gwynedd.gov.uk/en/Council/Councillors-and-committees/Meetings,-minutes-and-agendas/Meetings,-minutes-and-agendas.aspx?pwyllogor=/2013-14/Pwyllogor Craffu Corfforaethol Corporate Scrutiny Committee/2013-09-05](https://www.gwynedd.gov.uk/en/Council/Councillors-and-committees/Meetings,-minutes-and-agendas/Meetings,-minutes-and-agendas.aspx?pwyllogor=/2013-14/Pwyllogor%20Craffu%20Corfforaethol%20Corporate%20Scrutiny%20Committee/2013-09-05)

I was asked a similar question by the Scrutiny Committee on the 5th September 2013 and the response given at that time is quoted below:

“Is the ambition for improving engagement now actually realistic in view of the new financial challenges facing the Council?”

- 4.1 *In view of the future financial constraints with which we will be faced, it is certainly true that we will have to carefully consider which elements of the Strategic Plan we can continue to accomplish.*

- 4.2 *Of course, in one respect, it could be argued that in such circumstances effective engagement is event more important in order to ensure that we do the right things with whatever resources we have, by reflecting out people's priorities.*
- 4.3 *As yet the Cabinet has not given consideration as to which projects within the Strategic Plan have to be re-prioritised but I shall be recommending that the engagement project be retained but that we try and do this within the resources presently available.*
- 4.4 *After discussing with officers, I foresee that this should be possible with a substantial part of the strategy but if additional resources are required for any aspect, this can be considered in view of any resulting benefit that would arise. “*

In that respect therefore the strategy and completing the timetable had been tailor-made to the resource available.

However, after developing the strategy, it became apparent that we needed to undertake another enormous piece of engagement in order to prepare the way for resolving the financial challenge we are faced with – namely the Gwynedd Challenge.

As this need was critical in order to facilitate the Council's ability to move the savings programme forward (and therefore to sustain the Council's viability) it was necessary to divert the resource available for the Engagement Strategy to fulfil this work in the first instance.

This is the reason why concern has been expressed as to our ability to achieve the promise given in the current year – namely the fact that another more important work stream has had to be completed before moving forward to achieve the issues in the original Engagement Strategy.

That is natural of course, the Council's Strategic Plan should be a live document, not a document that is established once and never changed no matter what the change in circumstances.

2.2 Can the requirements of the Strategy be achieved within the timetable and the resources available at present?

As noted above, there is some concern that it will not be possible to achieve some elements of the original Strategy in accordance with the original timetable, because of the timetable to present the Gwynedd Challenge initiative.

The Project Group is currently assessing what can be achieved this year, taking into account the requirements of the Gwynedd Challenge and the need to adapt the timetable so as to accomplish this.

There is no intention to delete any part of the Strategy – the only intention is to consider amending the work programme to coincide with the resource available.

2.3 How do you measure the Engagement Strategy's success?

The Strategy presented to the Scrutiny Committee highlighted how we would measure the Strategy's success. The relevant part of the strategy is cited at Appendix 2.

2.4 What guidance and/or assistance is available to managers and Council staff in the engagement context?

This is one of the work streams highlighted in the Strategy. As seen in the timetable identified at Appendix 1 (work streams 2 & 3), the intention was for this to be in place by the beginning of April 2014 and for the Senior Managers' Academy to receive a presentation on it by July.

As noted above, because of the Gwynedd Challenge requirements, this has not transpired. The Project Group is currently considering the revised timetable for achieving this.

"Engagement" is however a heading within the Managing Change course arranged for managers. Practical assistance is made available for managers and head of departments on engagement issues either through the Communications Unit or through the Strategic and Improvement Department. The need for advice or practical assistance is on the increase with officers working on large projects such as promoting recycling or smaller schemes such as the recent changes at Canolfan y Gwystl.

2.5 How operational is the Engagement Handbook within the Council?

As noted above, as it has not yet been widely publicised, it is not entirely operational within the Council.

The handbook has however been distributed to some groups within the Council such as attendees of the Managing Change Course or at events held in relation to engagement. It is also offered to officers making enquiries/requests for assistance regarding engagement. The handbook is also available on the Council's website.

2.6 Is the Engagement Forum in place so as to share good practice and to learn from engagement experiences?

No – again due to the reasons given above.

2.7 Has the Engagement Portal been established on the Council's website? If so, how much use has been made of it? If not, what are the reasons?

No – again due to the reasons given above. However, material and good engagement practices are available on the Council's intranet. It is proposed that material be added in the near future when the Council's new web site is operational and as a result of which, the material will be marketed wider to the departments.

2.8 What do you see as the role for Cabinet Members/front line members in the new engagement arrangements?

It is premature to reach a conclusion on this. Obviously there is a role but it is important that we establish a consensus regarding that role rather than convey the opinion of one person.

There is a piece of work in the Strategy (namely work stream 8) which has been formed to establish the overall opinion regarding the role of front line members in the engagement arrangements.

By now work has been carried out in this field with the Task Group, represented jointly by members and officers, analysing the matter and identifying 11 areas that need improvement. The areas requiring improvement vary from extensive complex issues such as planning change and managing expectations to much smaller and more operational issues, such as simple language and correct contact details.

The Task Group will be meeting again soon in the new year to draw up a work programme which will be presented to the Democratic Service Committee. Following that, we will have better material for defining exactly what the role of the front line member should be in the engagement process.

2.9 What assistance and/or leadership is available to elected members in the engagement context?

It is premature to note this. This is dependent on the outcome of work stream 8 as mentioned in 2.8 above.