

CABINET CYNGOR GWYNEDD



Report to a meeting of the Cabinet

Date of meeting:	14 February 2023
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Menna Jones
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Title of Item:	Participation Strategy - Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021

1 THE DECISION SOUGHT

The Cabinet is requested to recommend the draft Participation Strategy to the Full Council meeting on 02/02/2023 for adoption.

2 THE REASON FOR THE NEED FOR A DECISION

Under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, the Council must encourage local people to participate when it makes decisions and publish a Participation Strategy which notes the ways that local people are encouraged to participate in the Council's decision-making process.

The Cabinet is requested to consider:

- The content of the strategy - is it clear and understandable and fulfils the requirement?
- Has the response to the observations which arose from the public consultation been sufficient?

3 INTRODUCTION

It is the Full Council's decision to adopt the Participation Strategy. Before doing so, a consultation is required. A public consultation was held in January 2023 the results of which are reported upon below.

4 THE RATIONALE AND JUSTIFICATION FOR RECOMMENDING THE DECISION

The Council must prepare a strategy which explains how it will comply with the duty to encourage participation. Therefore, the aim of the public Participation Strategy is to encourage people to participate in the decision-making process and note the arrangements that this Council intends to put in place to embed a culture of partnership with the public.

This is our first Participation Strategy, and the strategy is expected to evolve and improve over time as good practices emerge and as further technological advances are made.

- What must be included in the Strategy?

In line with the Act, the elements listed below must be included:

- a) ways of raising awareness amongst local people of the function of the principal council; ways of raising awareness amongst local people of how to become a councillor, and what the role of councillor entails;
- b) ways of facilitating access for local people to information about decisions made, or to be made, by the council;
- c) methods of promoting and facilitating processes where local people can submit observations to the principal council, about a decision before, and after, it is made;
- d) arrangements made, or to be made, for the purpose of the Council's duty in section 62 of the Local Government (Wales) Bill 2011 (bringing the public's views to the attention of overview and scrutiny committees);
- e) ways of raising awareness amongst members of the main council of the advantages of using social media to communicate with local people.

- Establishing a Strategy and Consultation

It is the Full Council's decision to adopt the Participation Strategy following consultation with the public.

Prior to the consultation, a draft Strategy was created to try to set out our objectives in terms of participation in accordance with the above requirements in the act. Our intention is to explain how our objectives in terms of participation will make a genuine difference to the way we engage with people in Gwynedd. Within every objective, we have identified clear outcomes and actions.

A public consultation was held in January 2023 which was an opportunity for individuals to give their views on the content of the draft Strategy. It was noted in the consultation that it was intended to improve the design of the Strategy in order to make it easier and more interesting to read and understand before publishing it in its final format. The consultation was published on the Council website and was open for 18 days.

The draft Strategy is included in **Appendix A**, with the adaptations following the consultation shown in blue text. An example of the design has been included in

Appendix B for Cabinet members to see. The design and text will have been updated in full prior to submitting to the full Council for adoption.

- Assessment of Impact

Public sector duties. In accordance with the legal duties under the Equality Act 2010 (including Welsh public sector duties) when making decision, the Council must give due attention to the need (1) to eliminate unlawful discrimination (2) advance equality of opportunity and (3) encourage good relations based on the protected characteristics.

The Equality Impact Assessment was prepared as we consulted with the public on the draft Participation Strategy. The Equality Impact Assessment was updated following the consultation and is attached in **Appendix C**. No specific negative impacts have been identified from this work; however we must be careful not to exclude anyone from the arrangements now or in the future due to an over-reliance on technology.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 involves improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. The act places a well-being duty on public bodies which is aimed at delivering the seven well-being goals, namely a prosperous, resilient, healthier, more equal Wales with cohesive communities and a vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language which is globally responsible. The Strategy contributes to fulfilling this duty, specifically coherent communities, by promoting access and contribution to the Council's democratic processes.

- Consultation Results

The following is a summary of the results of the consultation by objective as well as any change to the Draft Strategy as a result of the consultation. The changes have been highlighted in blue text on the Strategy in **Appendix A**.

89 responses to the consultation were received.

Objective 1. Promoting awareness of the functions that the Council performs for local residents and businesses and for visitors.			
<i>Consultation question - Does the Strategy include ways of raising awareness amongst local people of the functions that the Council performs for local residents and businesses and for visitors?</i>			
Yes	No	No opinion	No response
51	12	14	12
While a high percentage of respondents responded that the strategy includes ways to raise awareness among local people of functions the Council performs for local			

residents and businesses and visitors, a number of narrative comments were received. The narrative includes

- The need to simplify information and review the structure of our website from the user's perspective making sure everything is clear on it.
- Room to improve the strategy's engagement with businesses
- The need to hold more meetings with the public in the community to hear opinions on different topics (rather than just webcasting committees). The Council promotes regular opportunities for the people of Gwynedd to provide feedback on our strategies, priorities and areas of work. During 2022 public engagement exercises were undertaken on issues such as the Council's Regeneration Strategy ("Ardal Ni 2035"), Council Tax Premium on Second Homes and Empty Houses, Improving Rights of Way and the Housing Needs of the People of Gwynedd. Over the year feedback was received from nearly 15,000 individuals and organisations to these exercises. While the Covid period limited the Council's ability to carry out face-to-face engagement exercises this is an issue that will be addressed during 2023/24.
- There was a comment about sharing information about the Council on notice boards in the community, however, that would probably date very quickly. Information about the work of the Council, including committee reports, decisions, useful information, etc. is regularly shared via several channels:
 - press releases used by journalists as the basis for articles, news reports and newspaper articles;
 - the Council's corporate Twitter and Facebook accounts;
 - a "Newyddion" civic newspaper distributed directly to the County's 63,000 households;
 - via the committee pages, "your councillor", news etc. on the website www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru.
- There were also comments on the Council's work e.g. planning decisions, bus services, arrangements at recycling centres etc., which are outside the boundaries of this consultation.

Any change - in light of the above comments, we have highlighted in the Strategy that the website contains information about functions the Council performs for residents, local businesses and visitors. In addition, the implementation plan already states the need to regularly review the content of the website, and we have added reviewing the structure of the website as well.

Objective 2. Sharing information on how to become a Councillor, and about what the role of a Councillor entails.

Consultation question - Does the Strategy include ways of raising awareness amongst local people of how to become a Councillor, and what the role of Councillor entails?

Yes	No	No opinion	No response
49	14	15	11

From the comments received, it appears that the draft Strategy does fulfil this requirement for the people of Gwynedd. A comment was noted that there was a

need to encourage a greater diversity of new blood as Councillors, and particular attention to raising awareness of the role of Councillors in our schools to nurture the interest of the next generation in the field. However, there were some comments about there being no need for more (in number) councillors, although that is not what is in question in this objective.

An appreciation for the simultaneous translation service at Council meetings was also noted with a comment to extend this to Community Councils, however that is beyond the duty of the Council.

Any change - in light of the above comments, we have highlighted in the Strategy that the Council's 'Diversity in Democracy Statement' encourages people from all walks of life to stand in local government elections and elaborated to offer a better explanation on a few other passages.

Objective 3. Ensuring that information on decisions that have been made, or which are to be made by the Council, are more easily accessible.

Consultation question - Does the Strategy include ways of facilitating access for local people to information about decisions made, or to be made, by the council?

Yes	No	No opinion	No response
42	12	21	14

While a high percentage of respondents responded that the strategy includes ways to facilitate access for local people to information about decisions made or to be made by the Council, more narrative comments have been received this time. The narrative includes:

- The need to simplify information about decisions
- Frustration at the lack of adequate dialogue with the public – particularly community conversation and/or more consultations like this before decisions are made
- Not listening after receiving comments from the public
- An opportunity for the Council to make better use of social media to communicate messages, and to consider simple polls to gather public opinion on specific issues.

The Communications and Engagement Service is responsible for supporting Council departments and services to engage in a two-way dialogue with the public and to provide feedback at the end of exercises. Work is ongoing to encourage Services to strengthen arrangements for providing feedback to the public at the end of public engagement exercises.

The Covid period limited the Council's ability to hold face-to-face exercises and this is an issue that will be addressed during 2023/24.

Any change – highlight in the participation strategy that the Decision Notices are a summary of the decision in committee e.g. a decision on Council tax and that there is no need to wait for the full minutes. However, there are specific rules about the minimum that must be included in decision notices and they cannot be simplified further or publishing certain issues only – all decisions have to be published.

Objective 4 - Offering and promoting opportunities for residents to provide feedback to the Council, including observations, complaints and other types of observations.

Consultation question (a) - Does the Strategy include ways of offering and promoting opportunities for residents to give feedback and comments to the Council on a decision before, and after, it is made?

Yes	No	No opinion	No response
43	16	18	12

Consultation question (b) Does the Strategy include arrangements made, or to be made, for the purpose of the Council's duty in section 62 of the Local Government (Wales) Bill 2011 namely bringing the public's views to the attention of overview and scrutiny committees?

Yes	No	No opinion	No response
39	13	25	12

From the comments received there was encouragement for the Council to proceed to create more opportunities for the public to give feedback and contribute their comments on key decisions, particularly considering simple and easy ways to do so. There was an emphasis in the comments for the Council to think from the perspective of the user, which is in line with the Council's principles of putting the people of Gwynedd at the centre of everything that is done.

There was support for holding consultations and opportunities for the public to comment, however criticism was received on the lack of reporting back on the results. It is noted however that there is a place to report back on the results of consultations on the website, via a link to reports to committees.

An opinion was also stated by an individual that businesses should be contacted directly to secure their views when any consultation is open.

When engaging on topics directly related to local businesses, information is communicated through the Business Network and the Economy and Community Department's social website accounts. More generally, all public engagement exercises are promoted through multiple channels including press releases, social website posts, information and link to the questionnaires from the home page of the Council's website etc.

There was no specific comment on bringing opinions to the attention of the oversight and scrutiny committees. However, some comments were made which have already been seen regarding clear and simple communication, frustration at the lack of real dialogue and information about consultation results. In addition, the need to highlight how the Council will go about reaching the people who are difficult to reach in the future was noted.

Any change – the comments received support and align with the direction of action for the coming period. However, we have elaborated on the steps for reporting back following public consultations

Objective 5. Promoting awareness of the advantages of using social media to communicate with residents for Councillors.

Consultation question - Does the Strategy include ways of raising awareness amongst members of the main council of the advantages of using social media to communicate with local people?

Yes	No	No opinion	No response
38	9	27	15

From the comments received, there was support to raising councillors' awareness of the benefits of using social media to communicate with residents, encouraging more to do so and for the Council to ensure training for the proper use of social media by Councillors. The Council has been offering specialist social media training to councillors for several years now.

Comments were also noted about over-reliance on social media as not everyone uses them, and the need for Councillors to be aware of the risks that can arise when using social media.

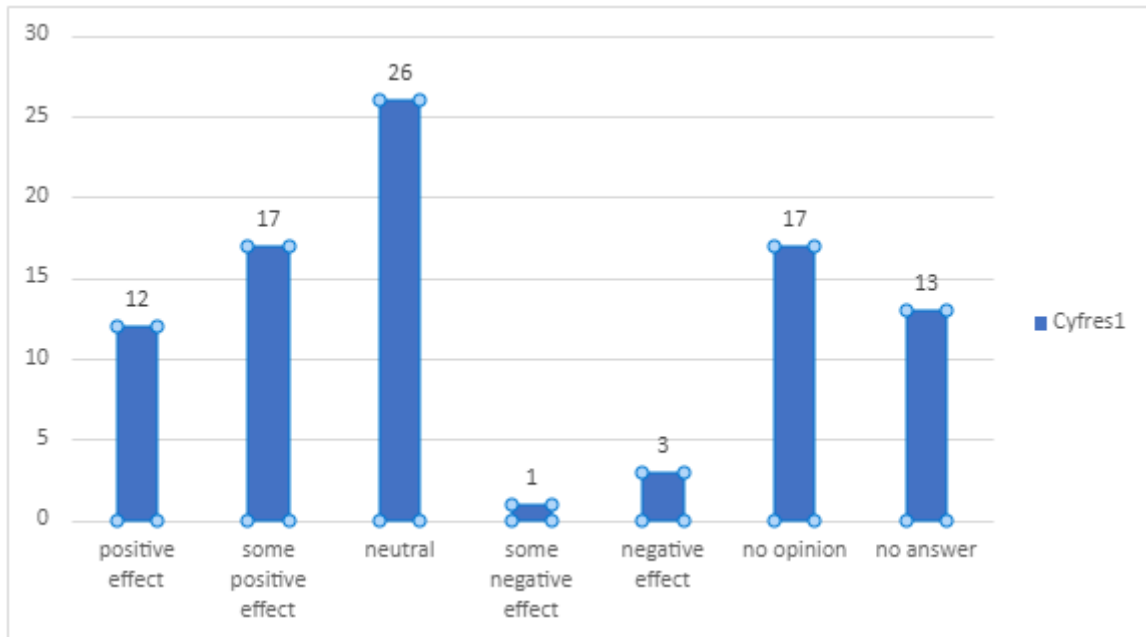
In addition, a comment was made about the need to ensure that 75% of the electorate votes on any Council decision. This would be practicably impossible. Local Councillors have been elected by the people to represent them on the Council with any decisions that are made.

Any change – there is a short modification to the Strategy by drawing the Councillors' attention to the fact that social media is one means of communication and that there are potential risks in using them.

- The Welsh Language

Consultation on the impact of any policy on the Welsh language is required. Responses can be found below. The following question was asked:

What do you think will be the impact of the Participation Strategy on the Welsh language, the opportunities to use it and its status within the community?



The following question was also asked:

Do you have any comments about your choice above, for example, are there any opportunities to have a more positive impact on the Welsh language and its use, or to reduce any negative impacts?

Relevant comments to the Participation Strategy included:

- *“Making the council's work, which is naturally Welsh, more visible to the public is positive for the Welsh language - whether one can speak it themselves or not.”*
- *“I think increasing everyone's engagement with the council would be beneficial to the language- surely through people seeing it used fluently and frequently in important contexts.”*
- *“The history and culture of the area should be celebrated along with the Welsh language.”*

Comments that the Council should not use Welsh at all were also received.

5 NEXT STEPS AND TIMETABLE

- Public consultation held 06/01/2023 – 23/01/2023
- Submit the results of the consultation and the Draft Strategy to Cabinet – 14/02/2023 for recommendation to the full Council.
- Full Council to adopt the Participation Strategy – 02/03/2023

6 ANY CONSULTATIONS UNDERTAKEN PRIOR TO RECOMMENDING THE DECISION

Monitoring Officer:

The legal team and I have contributed to the formulation of the draft strategy. I am satisfied that the necessary process was followed in order to create the recommendation and properly evaluate the relevant considerations. Cabinet will be asked to consider these issues and the results of the consultation when coming to its recommendation.

Chief Finance Officer:

Nothing to add from a financial proprietary perspective.

APPENDICES:

Appendix A - The draft strategy in text only format. The strategy has been adapted following the consultation comments received. The changes have been highlighted in blue text.

Appendix B - The design of the Strategy (draft 1) - for information purposes

Appendix C - Equality impact assessment