

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 21 March 2018

Public Involvement Panel Review

Report of the Chairman of the Panel, Cllr Dorothy Baverstock (Portfolio: Leader of the Council)

Recommended:

That the findings of the Panel are referred to the Member and Community Development working group to develop the proposals further and to report back to OSCOM with proposed actions for onward submission to Cabinet.

SUMMARY:

- This report considers the findings from the Public Involvement Panel (the Panel), which has been reflecting on the progress the Council has made over recent years to engage and involve communities and the public more effectively in informing decision making.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 In autumn 2017, OSCOM agreed to establish a panel to undertake a review of public involvement. The Panel has explored how the Council can build upon its strong track record of engaging communities and involving the public in the most effective way.
- 1.2 The Panel was chaired by Cllr Dorothy Baverstock and also included Cllr C. Dowden, Cllr Thom, Cllr Neal and Cllr Boulton. As a result of the review, the Panel has sought to evaluate the approach taken by the Council, and identify future areas for further development which forms part of the recommendation.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Panel has undertaken the review from the premise that public involvement forms an implicit part of the work councillors undertake on a daily basis within their communities. The scope of the review therefore has been focused on how councillors can more effectively engage with all parts of their community to inform decision making.
- 2.2 Councillors as democratically elected representatives have a critical role in being advocates for their communities and most importantly ensuring that all views are understood, not just those that shout the loudest. This forms a key

part of the role councillors play in influencing the decisions of the Council and its partners.

- 2.3 Public involvement comes in many forms and can be a powerful way in which to inform decision making, build community capacity and be a mechanism in which to evaluate the impact made within communities through projects and funding initiatives. Putting in place the processes to enable this to happen, is an important part of how people can influence their elected representatives and is a good way for the public to see in practical terms how they can have a say on the issues that matter most to them.
- 2.4 All this brings new demands on councillors and their roles and how they engage and involve their communities. It also broadens public involvement from just focusing on formal meetings to being more of an ongoing dialogue with residents through a variety of mechanisms fit for the future.
- 2.5 The Panel considered four areas namely:
- (a) A place-based approach to public involvement.
 - (b) The changing role of the Councillor as an advocate and facilitator within communities and communicating and involving the public through targeted approaches to ensure the widest range of views are heard.
 - (c) The changing context for councillors resulting from the emerging digital landscape and the role it can play in engaging the public and the new demands and opportunities this brings with it.
 - (d) Future skills required for councillors.
- 2.6 The Panel has drawn its findings from a variety of sources ranging from case studies, local data and feedback from councillors both within the Borough and further afield. Test Valley Borough Council recently took part in the “Voice of the Councillor” events in partnership with Kirklees Council, Leicester City Council, the Councillor Commission and the Municipal Journal. As part of this panel members were able to engage with councillors from across the country to learn lessons and share best practice which has informed this report.
- 2.7 The Member and Community Development working group is chaired by the Leader of the Council and includes Cllr C. Dowden who was also member of the panel. Its role is to develop the councils approach to member development, community engagement and place-based working.
- 2.8 The Panel is recommending to OSCOM that the proposals contained within this report be initially referred to the Member and Community Development working group for further development as a lot of what is contained within this report falls within the scope and remit of the working group.

3 Findings

A Place-based approach to public involvement

- 3.1 The Panel first reflected on the overall work that the Council has been taking forward over recent years in developing its place-based approach to working

with and involving communities. In 2011, the Council launched the “Empowering Communities programme” which focused on developing the role of Councillors. Its primary aim was to support councillors in helping communities across Test Valley to identify and prioritise their own needs and enable residents to get things done that matter to them. Working with the Local Government Association’s “Keep it Real scheme”, the programme sought to develop evidence-based decision making, genuine community involvement and the strengthening of representative and participative democracy.

- 3.2 A number of things were implemented as a result of this project. This includes:
- Establishment of the Community Team
 - Development of the Councillor Community Grants and Community Asset Fund
 - Development of information such as ward and parish profiles
 - An renewed induction programme for new councillors
- 3.3 There are two key principles to this approach. First is the recognition that Test Valley is made up of many different communities, each with a variety of needs and aspirations. Second is that in seeking to involve and engage with the public, a one-size fits all approach isn’t appropriate. The Panel reflected on their experiences as local councillors working within this environment and felt that public involvement / consultation is best undertaken out in the communities/places that people live in and through the networks that bring them together. This widens participation to ensure a good representative cross section of society is able to engage. It was concluded therefore that Councillors, have an important role in ensuring groups have a voice and that they have an important part to play in drawing together all of the evidence that can then be fed into more formalised policy and strategy development processes. Current examples of large-scale public involvement at a place-based level include:
- Romsey Future
 - Andover Vision
 - Review of the Local Plan
 - Corporate Plan 2019
 - Community, neighbourhood planning and parish Planning
- 3.4 As part of the review, the Panel considered the tools and processes currently available to Councillors to undertake this work. In particular access to good data and information through ward and parish profiles was highlighted. The Panel also explored emerging information sources such as “Customer Insight” which focuses on the communication preferences or particular behaviour traits of the borough’s different population groups when seeking to involve and engage with them. A short briefing note on the use of this information will be available at the meeting.
- 3.5 The Panel has identified the following proposals for consideration:

- Undertake a review of ward and parish profiles to ensure they are fit for purpose in preparation for new ones to be published in 2019. This should also integrate the use of customer insight information more effectively.
- Develop Councillors understanding of the use of customer insight information and how they can practically use it as a tool to involve and engage with residents.
- Undertake an evaluation of the different approaches used to engage people in the Andover Vision and Romsey Future processes.

The changing role of the councillor as an advocate and facilitator within communities & communicating and involving the public through targeted approaches to ensure the widest range of views are heard.

- 3.6 In seeking to explore ways in which the public can be better engaged and involved, the Panel felt that councillors have a critical role to play in being proactive in this work but also recognised that the environment in which they are operating is ever-changing.
- 3.7 As democratically elected representatives, councillors are advocates for their communities and most importantly ensuring that all views are understood, not just those that shout the loudest. Councillors are best placed to safeguard the interests of the most vulnerable and look at the needs of a community as a whole. They can play an important role in ensuring that it's not just those who know how the system works get involved or influence decision making.
- 3.8 Councillors are also an important inter-face with other public sector organisations that work within the Borough who do not have democratically elected representatives to hold them to account. The recent national Councillor Commission findings which the panel considered, point to the fact that councillors “proximity to the public is a unique feature of the office and provides councillors with intelligence about local issues – a vital resource to the councillor.”
- 3.9 It is within this context that the Panel felt that the role of the councillor has evolved, which brings with it new demands and a requirement for a broader set of engagement skills. The Panel highlighted examples of where councillors have to be more adept at engaging with people in a variety of ways and through different approaches. This ranges from formal surveying, door knocking, workshops with targeted groups and the growth of digital engagement. Within the context of the Council’s “Community Councillor” role, the panel identified that the key skills of being an enabler, facilitator, having a knowledge of how to engage and listen deeply, and being able to hold different perspectives all formed a core part of the role when working within in a complex system.

3.10 The Panel has identified the following proposals for consideration:

- Further develop the induction and ongoing member development programme to ensure a focus on building skill sets and engagement techniques that councillors can draw upon when engaging and involving residents.
- Using short video clips, develop a suite of case studies whereby councillors can share examples of the work they have been doing to engage and involve residents in order to build a library of best practice.
- Building on the work of Cllr Cockaday's OSCOM Review into Communication and Procurement, explore ways in which Councillors can have greater information and briefings on key issues through drop-in sessions and the Members Information Bulletin so that they are able to inform, engage and involve residents in the most appropriate way.
- Strengthen relationships with representative interest-groups such as the disability forum, older people's forums, and youth groups to develop mechanisms in which they can be engaged at the right point in collecting evidence to inform decisions.
- OSCOM identifies key issues from its work programme that it would like councillors to engage with communities on and gather insights from in order to inform committee discussions. To explore whether this could also be promoted through video and social media.

The changing context for councillors resulting from the emerging digital landscape and the role it can play in engaging the public and the new demands and opportunities this brings with it

- 3.11 Throughout the work undertaken by the Panel, the theme of the changing digital landscape was one which featured significantly from talking to councillors across the country via the "Voice of the Councillor" events.
- 3.12 The growth of digital media is changing the way in which the public wants to communicate and be communicated with. The Panel reflected that this will require councillors to develop their digital capacity in order to be part of some of the key conversations that are happening within their communities, and to be able to bring balance and breadth to the range of views relating to an issue. In recognising this, the Panel felt that developing the digital capacity of councillors is based on two key elements. First it is about accessing the right technology and networks, and secondly it is about being digitally confident and developing the culture and having the skills to engage in this way.
- 3.13 The Panel also explored some of the emerging methods being used to bring events and activities to a wider audience through broadcast technology. At the recent Voice of the Councillor event in Huddersfield, Kirklees Council for example were recording and broadcasting the plenary sessions alongside some of the key inputs from guests on the day. The Panel considered the

benefits of this approach and how that could work in regards to events and workshops within Test Valley.

3.14 The Panel felt that the digital landscape as it is now forms a key part of the community in which councillors should engage with as part of being a community councillor. However, the Panel also made clear that it is essential that digital engagement is only one part of how engagement and involvement of residents should occur. Evidence indicates not everyone engages in this way and councillors and the council should have a range of mechanisms in place to do this effectively.

3.15 The Panel has identified the following proposals for consideration:

- Explore further options around digital training and support for councillors to enable them to engage with a wider audience.
- Develop some in-house pilot training as a way to better understand the breadth and depth of digital skills training councillors require.
- Undertake further research into how the Council and Councillors can utilise a range of digital platforms to communicate, engage and gain feedback from the public around key issues.
- Pilot the use of blogs and videos through Romsey Future and Andover Vision as a way to engage and inform residents and partners on the progress being made through these projects.

Future skills for councillors

3.16 In undertaking this review of public involvement, the Panel were keen to look at both the practical things that can be done to make it easier for public involvement to take place as well as how councillors can be best supported in this. The Panel felt overall in keeping with the findings from the recent Councillor Commission, the ever-changing and complex landscape in which councillors are now working within does require innovative approaches to member development to be further developed.

3.17 The Panel has identified the following proposal for consideration:

- The development of a new Member Development Strategy to shape the future induction and training programme for councillors, with particular focus on how they can best be supported in taking forward the role of being a community councillor.

4 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

4.1 Engaging with and involving the public forms an important part of the evidence-base that councillors and the council's services use to shape the Corporate Plan and its delivery through the Corporate Action Plan. This review relates to all four corporate priorities.

- 4.2 Priority 4 which is about investing in a great place to “Contribute and be part of a strong community”, places a focus on local democracy to ensure all views are heard by strengthening the knowledge and skills of local councillors to enable them to work with communities on the things that matter most to residents.

5 Consultations/Communications

- 5.1 The Panel engaged with a variety of stakeholders through the recent Voice of the Councillor events, considered case studies based on the experiences of councillors within the borough and used feedback gathered as part of the recent roundtable with the Leader focusing on the engagement of the public in the development of the next Corporate Plan.

6 Resource Implications

- 6.1 None directly arising from this report.

7 Legal Implications

- 7.1 None directly arising from this report.

8 Equality Issues

- 8.1 None arising directly from this report.

9 Other Issues

- 9.1 Wards/Communities Affected – All

10 Conclusion

- 10.1 This report considers the progress made over recent years and the lessons learnt resulting from the Council’s work to engage and involve its communities more effectively. The Panel proposes that the Member and Community Development Group could consider these proposals and to then report back to OSCOM for onward submission to Cabinet.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:			
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