

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Report of the County Secretary

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Purpose of report

This item was requested by Ian Laidlaw-Dickson for scrutiny by the committee. The new Constitution of Hertfordshire County Council was formally adopted in November 2001, as a result of the Local Government Act 2000. One aim was to support the active involvement of members of the public in decision making. The purpose of this report is to review public engagement since the introduction of the new structure.

Summary

This report sets out the various mechanisms, both formal and informal, that are in place for consulting the public. Examples are given of how the public have been involved. Ways of increasing participation in the democratic process are suggested.

Results of a recent MORI survey on the County Council's decision making process are attached as Appendix B.

Conclusion

There are a wide range of opportunities for the public to engage in the democratic process informally. However, public awareness of the changes in the political structure is generally low. Making the formal aspects, such as scrutiny committees and voting more accessible (through publicity and extra information on the process) could help to increase participation.

Background

1.1 HOW THE PUBLIC CAN GET INVOLVED

a) Informal involvement

The County Council has a range of mechanisms in place to engage with users – a countywide Citizens Panel, user groups for each of its services, Herts Direct newspaper 4 times per year and online consultation via www.hertsdirect.org. All of these enable the public to be involved in the earlier stages of the decision making process.

Community Information

28 Library user panels act as a sounding board for ideas, which can either be local consultations, for example on proposals for library layouts when a building is being refurbished or countywide consultations. A public library user survey (an annual national mandatory survey) drives changes, for example to the stock that is bought and where it is located. The additional comments that are made at the end of their questionnaires are analysed and fed back to relevant managers for action. Archives and local studies carry out a similar survey.

Comment cards are widely available in the service points and suggestions implemented. Trading standards conduct a quarterly consumer satisfaction survey.

Satisfaction levels with those who have had cause to complain are tested across Community Information services.

Ad hoc consultation is also carried out in relation to particular areas of policy.

Environment

Consultation on statutory plans such as the Structure Plan, Minerals local plan and Waste Local plan plays an essential part in shaping strategy. This is done through Herts Direct newspaper, leaflets, postal and online questionnaires and exhibitions.

Hertfordshire Highways also consult through exhibitions before carrying out safety improvement schemes on roads. A series of public meetings have informed the County Council's response to the government consultation on airports.

Children, Schools and families

Elections have just taken place for Herts reps to the UK Youth Parliament (UKYP), over 13,000 11-18 year olds voted. All schools youth centres and harder to reach group of children in Hertfordshire, such as Looked After children, were invited to take part. Members of the UKYP sometimes hold joint surgeries specifically on youth issues with their Members of Parliament. There are 6 Hertfordshire members and their role is to help represent the views of young people across the county and link up with the existing groups, forums and councils.

Currently the Youth Parliament does not scrutinise Council decisions but could do so if it was a decision that had particular relevance to young people.

The CSF reference group is 40 + young people including representatives from the Youth Service, Youth councils and the Youth Parliament, as well as from groups of disabled children, black and minority ethnic children and those with experience of mental health issues. This group works in conjunction with the Strategic Health Authority.

Viewpoint (a computer based service designed to improve the quality of feedback from children) is used extensively, for example in over 465 Looked After children's reviews.

Adult Care Services

Having Your Say forms track user and carers experience of services, findings are fed into the annual complaints and satisfaction report to ACS scrutiny committee. Two quality monitoring officers visit approximately 20% of each Home Care agency's users once per year to assess the quality of the user experience in a number of settings.

The Customer Service Centre Service Improvement Group meets quarterly to resolve difficulties raised by representatives from minority ethnic groups, Carers in Herts, Age Concern and partner organisations including Health.

Fire and Rescue

Feedback from the public is sought in three main areas, Operational incidents and associated activities, Community Fire Safety Activities, Commercial Training.

Corporate Services

Ad hoc research is carried out throughout the year on topical issues e.g. regionalism, using MORI. Surveys of the Citizens Panel, both postal or by telephone are carried out approximately 4 times per year. Results from these and Herts Direct newspaper and online surveys are fed into member processes through Cabinet and CLG reports. Where required, qualitative research is carried out to explore certain issues in further detail e.g. focus groups on e- government, budget setting. The triennial statutory BVPI user satisfaction survey will be carried out in September 2003. Results will inform the BVPP for 2004/5.

b) Formal member processes

The formal channels for members of the public to engage in the political decision making process are:

The right to present a petition with at least 100 signatures at a scrutiny committee or full Council meeting.

The right to attend Cabinet.

To be able to participate in scrutiny committee discussions if invited.

To attend full council meetings to observe the proceedings and to speak at the discretion of the Chairman.

Executive members can be held to account by scrutiny committees, who can seek the views of users of the services they scrutinise – by inviting representatives of user groups to give evidence at their meetings for example.

The right to ask questions at meetings of the full Council.

Members of the public can find out what their rights are through the Council's Constitution and find out what decisions are coming up through the Forward Plan, published on the Council's website. "Contact us" details appear on the homepage of [HYPERLINK http://www.hertsdirect.org](http://www.hertsdirect.org) www.hertsdirect.org

for the public to make their views known to the council. The public are encouraged to view committee agendas and reports via the web although the subscription service is still available for postal copies.

1.2 HOW THE PUBLIC DO GET INVOLVED

Informal involvement

Public involvement in budget and priority-setting process

The public were consulted on their spending priorities in the Autumn 2002 edition of the HertsDirect newspaper. An on-line version of the newspaper survey was also put on the County Council's website. A separate survey took place of the 2,000 members of the Citizens Panel, followed by a series of four focus groups to explore the public's views in more detail. A total of over 8,000 people participated in the consultation exercise. The results of all the consultation were analysed by MORI and presented by MORI to all members in December 2002. The outcomes played a significant part in the final decision to not cut any services. In addition, the top three areas identified by the public for improvement were allocated extra funding in the 2003/4 budget. The public's views on priorities were also used to inform the Cabinet's review of the 2003/4 promises.

For further examples from each service please see Appendix A.

b) Formal involvement

Scrutiny Committees

The Constitution states that "Scrutiny committees are one of the prime public faces of the Council and members of the public should be both encouraged and enabled to attend and where appropriate to contribute. Public involvement can often strengthen the effectiveness, impact and profile of the scrutiny process." (p66f)

Whilst the move from Service to Scrutiny Committees has not resulted in increased public attendance as "spectators" the involvement of service users, professionals from partner organisations and stakeholder representatives has increased.

User representation at Committees

Early in the development of Scrutiny the Adult Care Services committee decided to co-opt user and carer representatives on an ad hoc basis as items of particular interest arise rather than having standing co-optees. This approach has worked well with the “sharp end” experience that these people are able to give being greatly appreciated by Members. The representatives themselves have also been extremely positive about the experience. The somewhat formal setting of a scrutiny committee meeting has, far from being intimidating, been welcomed by representatives who say that they now feel that their voices have been heard. User representatives have also been involved in Topic Groups:-

Examples of User/Carer involvement:

Carers – for the development of the ACS Carers Strategy

Users of Direct Payments for development of the scheme in ACS

Mental Health Service Users and Carers in Developing the approach to the National Service Framework in ACS

Voluntary Groups concerned with autism (PHEAT and HARC) for the CSF scrutiny of services for children with autistic spectrum disorder

The parents of children with disabilities in the long piece of scrutiny work which has helped to reshape services for children with disabilities

Partner Professionals

Scrutiny Committees have invited professionals from other organisations to come and assist informed debate of particular issues. These have included:

Residential Home owners when discussing the annual report of the inspection unit in ACS

Mike Fawcett, Head of Air Transport at the DeTR, the senior civil servant responsible for the proposals to expand airports in the Environment Scrutiny public hearing on the SERAS proposals

Health Service Partners for the discussion of bed blocking in ACS

District highways staff for the discussion of highways partnerships in Environment.

“Public” Responses

Some scrutiny committees have made direct appeals to the public through press releases for opinions on a particular issue. Where this has happened the response has generally been very positive. ACS issued a press release inviting comments on the Strategic Health Authority’s “Investing in your health” consultation and received more than 20 letters in response. One newspaper picked up from the committee papers that the Community Information and Protection Committee were to look at the issue of Fireworks which resulted in a large postbag. Further press releases have resulted in more than 200 letters and a number of people representing different views coming to talk to the topic group, including minority ethnic community groups involved in firework displays for Diwali celebrations.

On 21st May 2003 the ACS and health overview and scrutiny committee hosted a public hearing to assist the committee in responding to the consultation by the Beds and Herts Strategic Health Authority 'Investing in your health'. Consideration of this ten year vision, incorporating proposals on major site options, and heralding major shifts in the delivery of health care in the county, included listening to and questioning 20 witnesses, ranging from individual service users to key healthcare professionals.

A well attended series of public meetings have helped to inform the County Council's response to the second phase of the government consultation on airport development. Over 1500 members of the public attended the open meeting in Bishops Stortford, and over 700 at Rothamstead, 250 at Berkhamstead, 250 in Broxbourne and 200 at County Hall.

Petitions

Petitions remain the only mechanism that gives the public a "right" to speak at a committee. There continues to be a regular stream of petitions to the CSF scrutiny committee and occasional ones to Environment. Petitioners who go to Council meetings are automatically referred to scrutiny committees.

1.3 DO THE PUBLIC WISH TO BE MORE INVOLVED IN THE MEMBER PROCESS?

When the public were consulted about the political structures in November 2000 results showed that typically local residents were far more interested in the councils outputs in terms of services, rather than their internal structures or processes. Only 4% claimed to know about the new structure.

Results of the May 2003 survey of the Citizens Panel (Appendix B) show that generally the public do not feel they know much about how they can be involved in the County Council's decision making process. Nine percent feel that decisions are now more open than they used to be before the re-structuring of the council. However, there are many panel members who say they would like to be involved. Those who have not attended meetings say that more information and publicity would have encouraged them to attend, as well as if the meeting was of personal interest to them.

1.4 ISSUES FOR RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER

- a) In their role as representatives of their divisions, members should be very knowledgeable about local views and concerns within their division. Are we making the best use we can of this knowledge?
- b) Higher turnout in local elections could be encouraged if HCC applied to pilot new forms of voting – recent experience in the District Council elections shows that voter turnout rose dramatically where postal and electronic voting was available. (See Appendix C).

c) The survey results show that there is some interest in viewing live web broadcasts of county council meetings. One in four (24%) say they are very or fairly likely to use this facility if it was available to them, although seven in ten (69%) say they are not very or not at all likely to use it.

Experience in East Herts and St Albans District Council pilots suggest that interactive web broadcasts may be worth considering. Cambridgeshire County Council have also trailed web casting and has had some success although only for specific meetings on topics that have a high profile in the community. Full multimedia could be set up so that the public can email and text in their questions and comments.

d) Email alerts are being explored as a means of encouraging residents to participate in consultation exercises. This is part of the website development programme.

e) Members may want to consider moving the scrutiny committee to a venue in an area where there is a topic of interest under discussion so that local people can find it easier to attend.

Publicity for survey results - should members receive results of Citizens Panel surveys and other consultation exercises? Should all results be published on
HYPERLINK <http://www.hertsdirect.org> www.hertsdirect.org ?

In our steps to develop as a learning organisation, the scrutiny committee may wish to consider whether we do learn as much as we can from the feedback we get from our own service users and citizens.

Financial implications

If web casting facilities are introduced it is estimated that this will be in the region of 30K. Moving scrutiny committees to localised venues will cost approx. £1,000 per meeting. Budget would need to be identified.
Any e-voting pilots would be funded by the Home Office.

3. Rural implications

Travel/transport needs of rural communities could be reduced if meetings were broadcast over the website to avoid residents having to travel to County Hall. Access to services could be improved if rural residents are encouraged to engage in the decision-making process and give their views on services. Electronic voting could also improve engagement of rural communities.

Background material referred to by the author while compiling this report

Norfolk County Council discussion paper on scrutiny

MORI Citizens panel report May 2003

HCC Corporate Consultation standards

APPENDIX A

Examples of how the public do get involved

Community Information

Library opening hours – a large scale survey was carried out in 2002 which resulted in opening smaller libraries at lunchtimes and larger libraries 6 days a week instead of 5. A recent Best Value review of the libraries service included 23 focus groups with library staff and users, including ethnic minority community groups in Watford and Hitchin. A recommendations workshop with Members was held in May 03 to explore the outcomes further.

Environment

Waste Strategy – exhibitions, roadshows, focus groups, leaflets and a survey of the Citizens Panel informed the decision on this in 2002/3. Hertfordshire Highways recently involved the public in the redesign of the Ware Road roundabout in Hertford and the development of the county's first Home Zone in Waltham Cross.

Children, Schools and Families

Over 2000 children and young people were consulted on the CSF plan, preventative strategy, Strategic Health Authority review and Children's Fund using drama, workshops and Viewpoint. The CSF reference group (now the Hertfordshire Children and Young Persons Strategic Partnership), for example, helped shape the national Healthy Care standards for looked after children. The Youth Parliament surveys have resulted in re-structuring local youth services. Most schools have pupil councils and there are current plans to increase the number of these and link all these groups and consultation mechanisms in to a more structured process.

Adult Care Services

Approximately 400 Having Your Say forms have been received since December 2002, with follow up action taken where required. In December 2002 2,800 clients, carers and service providers involved with the community learning disability teams and partner agencies were sent questionnaires to get their views on the service. A series of face to face consultations (one for carers and one for users) were then arranged on a quadrant basis during March 2003 to give feedback from the questionnaires and discuss improvements.

This was followed by a staff conference on 7th May 03 where all the issues were discussed and shared on a team basis. This resulted in each team producing their action

plan for the coming years.

Action Taken: Teams agreed that all clients should have more direct access to named workers. Arrangements for this are now in place. In addition a local brochure for each team has been produced on the suggestion of users and carers.

Fire and Rescue

The Command and Control Centre have sent a Best Value questionnaire to 3000 individuals who called for help using the 999 route.

For the Fire Setters programme [joint counselling arrangements] formal feedback is requested via telephone 6 months after initial contact.

Course evaluation sheets have been received and analysed from the majority of the 3000+ commercial training customers.

Appendix B

Results of the MORI Hertfordshire Citizens Panel Spring Survey May 2003

The County Council's Decision-making Awareness of County Council Structures

Nearly one in four Panel members say they are aware that three years ago, the structure of the County Council was changed and a Cabinet introduced. As can be seen from the chart below, awareness is highest among men and those aged 55 or over.

Only nine per cent feel that County Council decisions are more open now than what they used to be before the re-structuring of the Council. This proportion rises only slightly, to 16%, among those who say they were aware that the structure of the Council has changed. Most are not able to provide an opinion: more than three in five (63%) Panel members say they "don't know" or do not answer the question. Three in ten (28%) say they do not think the re-structuring has made Council decisions more open.

Perceptions of whether the Council's decisions are more open by awareness of County Council structures

All

Aware of re-structuring

Base: Hertfordshire Panel members, 28th March – 24th April 2003

(1,557)

%

(408)

%

Yes, more open

9

16

No

28

34

Don't know/not sure

61

50

Source: MORI

Getting involved in the Council's Decisions

Generally, Panel members do not feel they know much about how they can be involved in the County Council's decision-making process. Only eight per cent say they know a great deal or a fair amount, while nearly nine in ten (87%) know not very much or nothing at all.

However, there are many Panel members who say that they would like to be involved in the Council's decisions. Transport issues is the subject that most would like to get involved in, and it is particularly men who are interested in getting involved in this (44% of men compared with 25% of women). However, it should be noted that this preference may have been influenced somewhat by the content of the questionnaire, which focused heavily on highways and transport issues.

Women are more interested in getting involved in decisions about education services (27% of women Vs 21% of men) and services for children and families (25% Vs 17%). There are also clear age differences, reflecting the focus of the services: Those aged 65 or over are the most likely to want to get involved in decisions about services for older people (37%), while those aged under 35 are typically interested in education services (37%) and services for children and families (34%).

Of those who do want to be involved, most (75%) would prefer to be involved by communicating by letter/email. Two in five (41%) would like to attend a meeting in their local area.

One in five do not want to be more involved in the Council's decisions.

Awareness of Political Representatives

Panel members are most likely to know the name of their local MP, whereas about one in five say they know the name of their local County or District/Borough Councillor.

As is typically the case, older people are more likely than younger residents to indicate awareness on these types of political issues. About one in three (35%) people aged 55 or over say they know the name of their local County Councillor, over two in five (43%) know the name of their District/Borough Councillor and over four in five (84%) know the name of their local MP. Half of people (53%) aged between 16 and 34 say they know the

name of their local MP.

Contacting the Local County Councillor

One in seven Panel members have contacted their local County Councillor in the last 12 months. Those aged 65 or over and those who are dissatisfied with the Council in general are the most likely to have contacted their County Councillor.

Just under half (45%) of those who have contacted their County Councillor say they were happy with the response, while nearly one in three (28%) were unhappy.

Attending County Council meetings

Only three per cent of Panel members say they have attended County Council meetings open to the public within the last 12 months.

Those who have not attended typically say that more information and publicity about meetings would have encouraged them to attend, as well as if the meeting was of personal interest to them.

Q

What would have encouraged you to attend?

Base: All who have not attended a County Council meeting in the last 12 months (1,461)

%

Information on when and where meetings are to be held

13

Advance notice/if had known about it

11

If I felt personally interested/involved in a particular issue

8

Information on what was on agenda

8

If an issue was to affect me directly

5

Close location/local meeting

4

Nothing/no wish to attend

3

Better publicity/advertising

3

Convenient meeting times

3

Please see computer tables for responses of less than 3%

Other

2

Don't know

1

Not stated

40

Source: MORI

Using the Internet to get Involved

Six per cent of Panel members say they have searched for County Council committee papers on the Council's website. About half (52%) of those who have used this facility say they were able to find the information they wanted, while one in four (25%) say they were not able to.

There is some interest among Panel members in viewing live web broadcasts of County Council meetings on the internet. One in four (24%) say they are very or fairly likely to use this facility if it was available to them, while seven in ten (69%) say they are not very or not at all likely to use it. The level of interest in this web viewing facility is the same across all demographic groups.

Receiving Feedback from Consultations

In line with previous findings relating specifically to highways services, three in five (62%) Panel members say they would like to receive more detailed feedback about all types of Council consultations they have taken part in. Over half of these would like to receive a written summary report in the post and/or a newsletter.

Two in five (42%) of those who use the internet would prefer to receive feedback by email and one in five (21%) prefer to see it on the Council's website.

Appendix C

Overall turnout for district elections May 2003

Broxbourne	25.26%
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Dacorum	33.41%
East Herts	just under 30%
Hertsmere	27.58%
North Herts	36.15%
St Albans	43% *
Stevenage	52.2%**
Three Rivers	30.96%
Watford	32.05%
Welwyn Hatfield	33.1%

KEY

*e voting pilot

** postal only pilot, no polling stations.

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