

**HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
TUESDAY 15 JULY 2003 AT 10.30 A.M.**

Agenda Item No.

12

**REPORT OF THE RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
THURSDAY 19 JUNE 2003**

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

The Scrutiny Committee have considered a report requested by County Councillor Ian Laidlaw-Dickson to review public involvement in the democratic process.

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 the scrutiny was to review public engagement since the introduction of the new structure.

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.

1. Introduction

1.1 HOW THE PUBLIC CAN GET INVOLVED

a) Informally

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 the 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 the Adult Care and Health 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 and 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 by post and telephone are carried out approximately 4 times per year. Results from these and the 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 Best Value Performance Plan for 2004/5.

b) Formally

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

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

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

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

The right to attend Cabinet.

To be able to participate in Scrutiny Committee discussions if invited.

The rights of members of the public are set out in the Constitution. They can 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> www.hertsdirect.org for the public to make their views known. The public are encouraged to view committee agendas and reports via the web and a subscription service is available for postal copies.

1.2 HOW THE PUBLIC DO GET INVOLVED

a) Informally

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.

b) Formally

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."

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 now Adult Care and Health Scrutiny 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. A press release was issued on behalf of the Adult Care and Health Scrutiny Committee inviting comments on the Strategic Health Authority’s “Investing in your health” consultation. More than 20 letters were received in response.

On 21 May 2003 that Committee hosted a public hearing to assist the committee in responding to that consultation. This 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.

One newspaper picked up that the Community Information and Protection Committee were to look at the issue of Fireworks and this 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.

Petitions

Petitions remain the only mechanism that gives the public a “right” to speak at full Council or at Committee. There continues to be a regular stream of petitions to the CSF Scrutiny Committee and occasional ones to Environment. Petitions to Council are referred to the next appropriate Scrutiny Committee meeting or to officers for consideration and report to the local member and Group Spokemen.

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 Council’s outputs in terms of services, rather than its internal structures or processes. Only 4% claimed to know about the new structure.

Results of the May 2003 survey of the Citizens Panel 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.

2. 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 were encouraged to engage in the decision-making process and give their views on services.

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.

3. Financial implications

Web casting of Council and Committee meetings would cost in the region of £30,000. Moving Scrutiny Committees to localised venues would cost approximately £1,000 per meeting.

In both cases budget provision would need to be made.
Any e-voting pilots would be funded by the Home Office.

4. Committee Views

The Committee observed the need to improve public involvement in Council activities such as elections and meetings but there was no consensus on how this could be achieved. The following views were expressed : -

- a) Higher turnout in local elections could result 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). However there were some concerns about secrecy and misuse etc.
- b) Polling hours for local elections could be extended to conform with the hours for parliamentary elections and have consistent hours for all elections i.e 7 am to 10 am.
- c) Public participation at Cabinet meetings i.e. allowing presentation of petitions and / or asking of questions
- d) The petition process could be extended to include public debate when petitions are presented.
- e) All Scrutiny Committees could adopt the Select Committee / Hearing approach in considering issues.
- f) A more pro - active approach to using the media should be developed.

- g) More use should be made of the knowledge of County Councillors as representatives of their divisions, providing a source of local views and concerns in their divisions.
- h) The MORI survey results showed 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.
- i) Email alerts should be used as a means of encouraging residents to participate in consultation exercises. This is part of the website development programme.
- j) Moving the venues of Scrutiny Committee meetings to places where there is a topic of interest under discussion so that local people can find it easier to attend.
- k) Publicity of survey results - there should be greater access to results of Citizens Panel surveys and other consultation exercises, with all results being published on HYPERLINK <http://www.hertsdirect.org> www.hertsdirect.org
- l) To continue to develop HCC as a learning organisation we should listen more to feedback from our service users and citizens.

**IAN LAIDLAW -DICKSON
CHAIRMAN**

County Hall
Hertford
19 June 2003

Appendix A

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.

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 B

Overall turnout for district elections May 2003

Broxbourne	25.26%
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%

Welwyn Hatfield [Hatfield South]
County By Election on 19 June 2003 23 %

* - e-voting pilot

** - postal only pilot, no polling stations