All Wales Study: Public Engagement in Local Government

Torfaen County Borough Council

Audit year: 2010-11
Issued: August 2011
The team who delivered the work comprised Gwilym Bury and Nick Selwyn
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### Introduction

1. Public engagement can be defined as ‘a process that brings people together to address issues of common importance, to solve shared problems, and to bring about positive social change. Effective public engagement invites citizens to get involved in deliberation, dialogue and action on issues that they care about. In short, ‘at its core, public engagement is about citizens having a voice in the public decisions that impact their lives.’

2. Public engagement also helps leaders and decision-makers understand the perspectives, opinions, and concerns of citizens and stakeholders. When done well, public engagement includes those members of the community whose voices have traditionally been left out of political and policy debates. Moreover it:
   - helps people weigh a variety of perspectives and listen to each other’s views;
   - builds common understanding, manages differences and establishes direction for moving ahead on tough issues;
   - builds trust and improves communication between the public and leaders; and
   - creates new opportunities for citizens to become involved in public problem solving and decision making.

3. In ‘Making the Connections: delivering beyond the boundaries’ the Welsh Government sets out the importance of public engagement:
   ‘We can deliver real improvements - **improvements that people can recognise and understand** - by engaging them in shaping and scrutinising our services. People must not be seen as passive recipients.’

4. Current research indicates that the implementation of public engagement in local authorities is at various stages of development. Scoping work by the Wales Audit Office also suggests there is a lack of clarity and agreement about what is meant by public engagement. Consequently, the quality of the engagement appears to vary significantly within and between authorities. The Wales Audit Office’s improvement assessment work in 2010 also highlighted public engagement as a significant issue in most local authorities.

5. Our study considered public engagement at all 22 unitary authorities. We will produce a brief report or presentation of our findings for each local authority and we will publish a national summary report about this work later in 2011.

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1. As above
2. Definition taken from ‘Public Agenda’ website 2010
### Focus of work

6. Torfaen County Borough Council is working to secure public engagement in a number of areas and the Council proposed that we focus our work on considering the effectiveness of public engagement in local government in two case study areas:
   - (a) improving access to Welsh medium education; and
   - (b) increasing the recycling, reusing and reducing of waste.

7. We therefore reviewed how effectively the Council carried out the consultation on improving access to Welsh education and we considered the processes used, their evaluation and the outcomes arising from the consultation. In reviewing engagement on recycling, reusing and reduction of waste we reviewed a number of initiatives where engagement activity had taken place. We also considered the Council’s corporate approach to public engagement.

8. We would like to thank the Council for the effort made to ensure that all documents and meetings with officers, Members and participants were arranged in a relatively short timescale.

9. The overall question that our study sought to answer was:
   
   ‘Does public engagement enable citizens to help shape what local government does?’

### Main Findings and Conclusions

We concluded that the Council actively encourages citizens to become involved in key decisions that affect them.

We came to this conclusion because:

**The Council have sound processes for informing and consulting with the public and acting together to carry through agreed actions.**

We came to this conclusion because:

- The Council demonstrated at a corporate level a clear focus on engagement issues. The Torfaen Local Service Board Community Strategy, for example, had as one of its three principles the importance of citizenship, democracy and participation. “Good engagement with people who experience our services allows those that make decisions to understand how effective our services are, and helps them make decisions that are likely to improve services. This also helps people in the community to feel that the organisations providing public services are listening and responding to them and in turn, lead to trust in the public services being provided.”

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3 Torfaen Community Strategy 2011 to 2025
Main Findings and Conclusions (continued)

- The Council demonstrates a high level of commitment towards public engagement. The Council is committed to consultation and engagement and has a clear consistent approach to delivering corporate engagement, through developing a joint consultation database incorporating a consultation diary and a network of consultation practitioners to reduce duplication and to share consultation (including the results). Engagement is systematically planned and there were examples of consultations on a range of issues.
- The Council uses social media such as Facebook and Twitter for survey work (for example the 2011 21st Century Learning consultation on how post 16 education is delivered) and also uses the web site to deliver press releases and promote its performance. The effectiveness of the IZWE web based citizen engagement tool in which 200 people participated in the pilot exercise is still being evaluated by the Council.
- The Council has processes to involve communities in decision making and to effectively empower local communities to deliver projects. The Torfaen Peoples Panel is the main tool for involving the public in the design and delivery of policies. The panel is established with a membership of approximately 350 and although it is recognised as not yet fully representative of all communities and segments of society it provides a useful resource for policy development and is in the early stages of being utilised across the Council.
- The two individual study areas we examined demonstrated a wide range of approaches to informing and consulting with the public and responding to the issues raised. The changes to the provision of Welsh medium education, for example, reflected the issues raised about the location of a new Welsh medium school. The range of surveys used to evaluate recycling arrangements lead to improvements in the service and achievement of Council performance targets.

At a corporate level the Chief Executive and her senior managers have demonstrated leadership in ensuring that engagement is not only reflected in the Councils’ corporate plan but also service level plans.
The Council has processes in place for effectively monitoring its public engagement work but more needs to be done to evaluate the effectiveness and all the costs of its engagement work.

We came to this conclusion because:

- The Council has undertaken over 50 engagement activities in the last year and processes are in place to report their results. For example, the ‘What Matters to YOU?’ campaign (when residents were invited to contribute to developing the new Council Corporate Plan) consisted of a questionnaire survey and single issue postcards. These were available online, through ‘Torfaen Talks’ (the Council community newspaper), at libraries and customer care centres. A series of road show events and meetings were also held throughout the County Borough where citizens were encouraged to give their views. A total of 892 surveys were returned and 1,237 one issue postcards were submitted. All the results were analysed by the Council’s Research, GIS & Citizen Participation Team and presented to elected members, along with geographical data to enable them to make informed choices about what the Council’s priority outcomes should be over the coming years.

- Corporate engagement is systematically planned and monitored and there were examples provided of consultations on a range of corporate issues such as on the Council’s budget. The results of the corporate consultations were subject to detailed scrutiny by elected members and senior officers.

- The Council is working with all its key stakeholders, often through the Local Service Board, to ensure that engagement work is planned and resources shared with other key stakeholders working in Torfaen such as, for example, the consultation work with the police on community safety and the youth service strategy. Over 1,000 young people aged 5-25 and almost 70 families were engaged throughout the period of consultation. Over 300 response comments were made by professionals and public respondents via the IT based system. Sessions were held in various settings including, schools, youth centres, young people’s forums, youth councils, and work-based learning providers.

- The Council does not know the overall cost of all its engagement work but believes many engagement costs are difficult to separate from other work. There was no evidence that service level value for money exercises were being undertaken to measure the impact and cost effectiveness of public engagement work.
### Main Findings and Conclusions (continued)

Although it is difficult to evaluate the overall impact of its engagement work, the Council can demonstrate examples of working with citizens to improve service delivery.

We came to this conclusion because:

- The two individual study areas we examined demonstrated examples of how specific service improvements resulted from effective engagement. For example the improved performance for recycling in difficult to access areas resulted from survey work undertaken by the staff delivering the service and identifying specific solutions with the public.
- There are other examples where the Council can demonstrate how engagement has led to greater efficiencies such as its consultation on street lighting.
- The Council is committed that its engagement with citizens aims to help shape services and become involved in public problem solving and decision making. The ongoing work on 21st Century learning whilst setting out the Council’s vision has a strong commitment throughout to involving citizens in shaping future services.

### Wales Audit Office Contact

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