

**Committee: Standards Committee**

**Agenda Item**

**Date: Monday, 22 March 2010**

**4**

**Title: Promoting Democracy**

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Item for information

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## Summary

1. This report outlines the council's responsibility to promote democracy and explains Local Democracy Week

## Recommendations

2. That the committee notes the report

## Impact

- 3.

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Communication/Consultation      | Good communication is essential in promoting democracy                        |
| Community Safety                | None  |
| Equalities                      | All sections of the community need to be given the opportunity to be involved |
| Finance                         | None  |
| Health and Safety               | None  |
| Human Rights/Legal Implications | None  |
| Sustainability                  | None  |
| Ward-specific impacts           | None  |
| Workforce/Workplace             | None  |

## Situation

4. Councils have a duty to promote the democratic process through legislation such as the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009.

5. This duty covers areas such as the functions of the authority, the democratic arrangements that govern it, how members of the public can take part and providing information on the role of councillors and how to become one.
6. One indicator of public Involvement in the democratic process is the turnout for elections. The figures for the previous few elections are as follows:  
  
2005 general election - 67.3 per cent (national average 61.4 per cent)  
2001 general election – 65.2 per cent (national average 59.4 per cent)  
  
2007 local election – 43.9 per cent  
2003 local election – 38.4 per cent
7. The national Place Survey, which was conducted in 2008, also provides data around participation through three national indicators: NI3 – civic participation in the local area and NI4 – percentage of people who feel they can have influence in decisions locally.
8. The results for NI3 are collated from a series of questions, such as whether a respondent has been a local councillor or any group making decisions for the community about issues including health, services for young people, crime problems, education and regeneration.
9. NI4 questions the level of influence a respondent feels they have in decisions affecting their local area.
10. Uttlesford was the top scoring council in Essex in both of these questions. The Place Survey results are attached for reference as Appendix A.
11. The national variance for NI4 was relatively small – the top scoring authority in the country achieved 46 percent while the bottom scored 20 percent. The national average was 29 per cent.
12. Uttlesford's score of 31 per cent was in fact the biggest increase in the country. The same question was asked in the Best Value General Survey 2006 and Uttlesford improved by seven per cent during those two years.
13. Ways the council has promoted local democracy in recent years include a political speed dating event, webcasting of key council meetings, complete overhaul of council's website to provide clearer access to information, review and revamp of area panels/forums to bring in other agencies.
14. The council is currently setting up a citizens' panel which will engage a representative cross-section of the community in consultation work to inform policy making and customer feedback.
15. The council has, in the past, been involved in events to mark the annual Local Democracy Week, which is held in October. The week is primarily aimed at engaging young people with the democratic process.
16. Although the council has not fully engaged with Local Democracy Week for the last two years due to resource pressures, the aim is to restart in 2010.

17. One of the main ways the council has marked Local Democracy Week is to send willing councillors to schools in their wards to talk to pupils about the work of the authority and particularly their role as a councillor. In the past these visits have attracted good publicity from the local press and positive feedback from the schools. It is likely such visits will be organised for 2010.
18. The council will also be adding an "I support local democracy" button to its website which will take users through to the Local Democracy Week section on the LGA website.
19. Various on-line tools are available from the LGA which will help in planning Local Democracy Week events.

## Risk Analysis

20.

| Risk  | Likelihood | Impact | Mitigating actions   |
|---|------------|--------|--|
| Disengagement from the democratic process leads to unrepresentative decision making | 3          | 3      | The council continues to run a range of engagement opportunities and promotes local decision making and democracy as much as resources permit. Antipathy towards the political process often stems from dissatisfaction or distrust at a national level, which has a knock-on effect at local level but also limits the positive impact the council can have |

- 1 = Little or no risk or impact
- 2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.
- 3 = Significant risk or impact – action required
- 4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.