

Committee: Council

Date:

Title: Report from the Public Engagement Working Group

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Summary

1. This report presents for members' information actions that will be undertaken following discussion at the Public Engagement Working Group.

Recommendations

2. None

Financial Implications

3. None. All actions can be delivered within existing budget.

Background Papers

4. The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author of the report.

None

Impact

- 5.

Communication/Consultation	The report covers current and proposed methods.
Community Safety	None
Equalities	Opportunities for all residents to participate is an important consideration when planning any engagement event and special consideration as to how to ensure representative participation is achieved is given to such aspects as access, publicity, etc.
Health and Safety	None

Human Rights/Legal Implications	None
Sustainability	None
Ward-specific impacts	None
Workforce/Workplace	Many of the council's staff are also residents and therefore the opportunity to consult and engage them will be built into any future plans.

Situation

6. Following the successful establishment of the Youth Council, the Public Engagement Working Group (PEWG) has been looking at wider issues of engagement in terms of the work the council does with specific sections of our community and with the public as a whole.
7. The PEWG gained an understanding of current thinking and practices from a presentation and discussion about the Local Government Association's New Conversations guide to engagement. One of the guide's authors attended a working group meeting to give an overview.
8. The PEWG has spent time discussing current engagement methods the council uses and has noted that there is a wide range of ways in which the council already effectively engages with its stakeholders. The working group has acknowledged that engagement is a broad term and occurs every time a stakeholder interacts with the council, from one-way communication, through consultation, to ongoing dialogue. A list presented to a meeting of the PEWG is appended to this report for information. The PEWG has also discussed changing trends in the media landscape and the increasing importance of social media as a means by which the public engages directly with the council.
9. Following this, members of the PEWG have identified where they see the council effectively engaging and conversely, areas where they believe improvement can be made.
10. This report sets out those areas where it believes the council should focus its efforts to better engage with stakeholders and recommendations for specific actions to achieve these improvements. Members of the PEWG have recognised that there is already a great deal of effective engagement taking place. The actions outlined in this report will finesse some of this work and complement existing engagement channels.
11. The PEWG endorsed these actions at its most recent meeting. This report is presented for members' information.

Member Training

12. Working group members have identified that councillors play a crucial role in effective engagement with the community. They are best-placed to understand the needs and views of the people they represent and provide valuable insight to improve policies and service delivery.
13. However, it was felt that in order to maximise the effectiveness of councillors, the council's approach to member development, including the induction process for new members, should be reviewed.
14. Officers are already working on the design of the induction programme following next year's elections. Examples of best practice have been sought and a meeting has been held with representatives of the LGA to identify the resources they offer in this regard. Members will shortly be invited to form a 'working group' to guide and advise on the work of officers and it is hoped all members will contribute their views to a short survey planned to help inform future training for members.
15. The PEWG identified the following points as being beneficial to a councillor's development, based on their own experiences and ideas:
 - Being allocated a 'buddy officer' from the council.
 - Being shown around the building during induction and then again a few weeks later.
 - Guidance from other experienced councillors was a valuable contribution.
 - To encourage attendance of all councillors at training sessions, both the new and re-elected, to ensure all were kept informed as things change.
 - Ongoing training for specific committees.
 - Commitment to a 4-year training programme.
 - Meeting etiquette.
16. The PEWG identified that councillors could take a more active role in National Democracy Week (July) and/or European Local Democracy Week (October). In local government, the annual social media campaign "Our Day" (November), through which councils highlight the myriad services they provide, has overtaken these initiatives in recent years.
17. Nonetheless there is merit in councillors reinvigorating their involvement in Democracy Week activities, principally through school visits to explain the work of councils and councillors. Many councillors already have good links with schools and community groups in their wards and are encouraged to make arrangements next year. Some degree of officer support could be offered where required.

Telling People What the Council is Responsible For

18. Whilst acknowledging that the council has many forms of public engagement and communication in place, members of the working group have expressed

views that the council does not go far enough in telling the public what it is responsible for. In order to improve this, there are a number of actions proposed:

19. **Council Tax leaflet** – The council produces a Council Tax leaflet each year. This is delivered to every household along with their Council Tax bill and contains information on what Council Tax is, who has to pay it, and how Council Tax is split between the relevant authorities. It also has information on the various discounts and exemptions available, as well as details on penalty notices, fraud prevention and debt management.
20. This leaflet presents a good opportunity to provide additional information about the services provided by Uttlesford District Council specifically, and how these are funded. This would be best realised in part by incorporating an infographic providing the headline figures in an eye-catching and easy-to-read format.
21. **Features on staff** – In order to better engage and educate the public in the work of the council, officers will produce regular features which highlight the work of key staff carrying out various different functions on behalf of the council. These would primarily be ‘public-facing’ roles such as, for example, Environmental Health officers who carry out restaurant inspections or Building Control officers. Articles would be featured on the council website and promoted through communications channels including the *Keep me posted* e-newsletters and on the council’s Facebook page. As well as providing information on many of the services the council provides to benefit the community it would also help to personalise the council.
22. **Participation in Meetings** – While there is time for public speaking before every Council, Cabinet and committee meeting, it is important to ensure that the public is aware of this opportunity. Therefore as part of the work to educate the public in the role of the council, regular publicity will be given to the different types of meeting the council holds, including what each committee is responsible for. A summary of upcoming meetings will be circulated, including via social media and the council’s e-newsletter service, *Keep me posted* to ensure residents are aware of the opportunities that are available to them.

Increasing Opportunity for the Public to Give Feedback

23. The council already gives many opportunities to the public and other stakeholders to provide feedback on a range of council proposals and services, from commenting on planning applications and speaking at meetings to district-wide consultation opportunities such as those on the budget and Local Council Tax Support scheme.
24. **Instant surveying** - Officers have investigated the possibility of further expanding feedback opportunities using the council’s e-newsletter service, *Keep me posted*, as a conduit for instant surveying.
25. The council will integrate simple ‘yes/no’ poll-type questions within the suite of newsletters – for example, asking subscribers whether they consider they are kept well informed by the council, or their view on a particular service or aspect of service. The advantage of this approach is that it is a cost effective way to improve the two-way conversation across this well-used platform.

26. Members' surgeries – Some councillors hold regular surgeries for residents in their wards. Currently these are managed and publicised by individual councillors. It would be beneficial to establish a page on the council website to host details of all councillor surgeries. It would be up to individual members to notify officers of their surgeries and reminders would be sent out via the Members' Bulletin. While we would not promote individual surgeries, we would regularly publicise this central location for residents to find out if and when their ward councillors are available.

27. Complaints – Complaints can be a valuable source of engagement and of course an opportunity to improve processes and customer service. The council already reports complaint data and the annual report of the Local Government Ombudsman via to the Governance, Audit and Performance Committee. Officers propose to expand this reporting by including quarterly complaints data in the Members' Bulletin as well as providing a link though the bulletin to the annual report to GAP.

District-wide Engagement Campaign

28. Considerable discussion has been held about the possibility of running a district-wide engagement campaign to help better understand public views on living in the district - what they like, what they would like to change and what can be done to make it an even better place to live.

29. Such a campaign would involve multiple methods of quantitative and qualitative research and would present a significant unbudgeted cost for the council.

30. The PEWG, while acknowledging such a campaign could be of benefit in the future, felt that this was not the time to proceed with it. The group has instead asked officers to conduct some background research on how other councils have approached such a campaign. The decision as to whether or not the council proceeds with this project in the future should be made following the May 2019 elections.

Digital Improvements

31. During discussions at meetings, members of the PEWG identified that there was scope for improvement to the council's website and also that while customers can expect an excellent level of service, at peak times there can be delays in phone calls being answered in the Customer Service Centre.

32. There is a two-stage programme already in place which will help address these issues, which is outlined below for members' information.

33. **Website** - Data shows a year-on-year increase in the number of visits to the council's website, from 446,572 in 2012/13 to 776,575 in 2017/18. The number of people accessing the website via a mobile device has almost doubled between 2014/15 and 2017/18 and now accounts for more than a third of all visits.

34. However, the council's website was six years old and had limitations both in terms of its look and how easy it was to use, particularly on mobile devices. In addition, the council is in a minority now with not offering an online account facility to allow residents to carry out popular tasks such as checking council tax balances, accessing housing rents information and notifying changes to circumstances which may affect benefits payments.
35. Socitm, the body for local government IT, runs an annual programme called Better Connected, which reviews every council website in the UK and awards a rating from one to four stars. This assessment comprises various tests on the usability of the website.
36. Uttlesford has always scored well on the tasks element of Better Connected, where the reviewer tries to complete common tasks such as booking a bulky waste collection, finding out information about a councillor or applying for a council tax single person discount. But in recent years the council has been pulled down on the mobile test because the age of the site means it does not work particularly well on modern mobile devices. For example, last year Uttlesford met all the criteria to be awarded the maximum four star rating (an exceptional achievement for a small district authority with very limited web resources) but the overall rating was two stars because of the mobile issues.
37. Following approval of a growth bid in February 2018, officers carried out a procurement exercise and selected a supplier for a new website. This site went live on 27 September and provides multiple benefits:
- Significantly improved functionality when viewed on mobile and tablet devices
 - Cleaner design based around Government Digital Service (GDS) principals as used on GOV.UK
 - Much improved 'signposting' to key tasks such as making payments, searching planning applications, applying for services
 - Improved forms package so that forms are easier to use and more secure
 - Better navigation so that 'customer journeys' are shorter – this means that it is easier for users to find what they want
38. **Citizens Access** - The second stage of this programme is the installation of Northgate Citizens Access. This system has a number of modules that will allow customers to set up personal accounts and carry out online transactions for Council Tax, Housing Benefits and Housing Rents, which they cannot do at the moment. As with the website project, a growth bid for the cost of this system was approved in February 2018.
39. The modules will integrate with the council's back office systems, reducing the need for manual intervention and allowing existing staff resources to be freed up to focus on other tasks.
40. Citizens Access will allow customers to carry out key transactions including applications for Council Tax discounts, accessing information such as balance and instalment details, changing details such as addresses, Direct Debit sign up, benefits status checks, housing repairs bookings and e-billing sign up.

41. It will allow the council to move away from paper Council Tax billing to e-billing and will make these services available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, instead of during council opening hours.
42. The aim is to reduce calls, visits and email enquiries to the Customer Service Centre for these services by 10 per cent within one year of the modules going live, rising to 15 per cent within two years. This will have a positive impact on waiting times and allow the council's Customer Service Advisors to focus on those customers who need to contact the council by traditional methods.
43. The Citizens Access project is in the early stages of commencement and will take 18 months to fully install. A soft launch of the service will take place during 2019/20 with all households receiving log-in details and guidance alongside their 2020/21 annual Council Tax bill.

Risk Analysis

44.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
The council's engagement methods are not effective, leading to reputational damage and a loss of confidence	2 – the council has well-established methods but there are areas for improvement as identified in this report	2 – a lack of engagement with the community the council serves could have a detrimental impact on the district	The actions set out in this report will help improve engagement

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.