

Wrexham County Borough Council - Public Engagement Protocol

1.0 Introduction and background

1.1 This protocol addresses the requirements on Local Authorities under section 62 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 – Engaging the Public.

1.2 This guidance suggests how these issues could be addressed and these have been adopted to highlight specific policies and procedures in the following areas:-

- Raising public awareness.
- Scrutiny websites.
- Develop internal mechanisms to enable public engagement.
- Public Engagement and Call In.
- Development of Protocols.

2.0 Raising Public Awareness

2.1 Public awareness of scrutiny in Wrexham can be raised through:-

a) Identifying issues of public interest

Scrutiny committee work programmes are continually monitored by their committee's chair and vice-chair, the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Group and the digital brand and communications section.

The purpose is to identify topics, well in advance of their consideration, that could be expected to generate or would benefit from increased public interest and therefore require publicity.

b) Use of Media

Issues expected to be of public interest are publicised through social and traditional media, with contributions invited from the public.

Items identified receive a press release/tweet and posting on the Council's Facebook page, publicising its future consideration. These contain a short explanation of the topic and those wishing to contribute are directed to the scrutiny webpage. This will provide further details of the issue and outline how they can contribute and ask them to contact the scrutiny team.

c) Scrutiny Website

The scrutiny page of the Council website, displays:-

- A guide to the Council's decision making processes
- A guide to the Council's scrutiny function.
- The terms of reference of each scrutiny committee
- The scrutiny public engagement protocol
- The forward work programme of each scrutiny committee.
- The current Annual Scrutiny Report.
- Contact details for facilitators

c) Webcasting

A small number of scrutiny committees, per year, are currently webcast.

These meetings are selected by the scrutiny co-ordinating group using the following criteria:-

- Has the topic already generated public interest?
- Would the topic have significant public interest?
- Raise the profile of an issue with the public.

Meetings that are broadcast follow the same procedure and guidelines as those required by non broadcast meetings and members of the public can participate in the meetings in line with the relevant policies and procedures outlined in this protocol.

Webcast meetings are available to view live, on the Council's website. These are also then viewable, on the Council's website, for 6 months.

e) Consultation

The Council carries out a wide range of consultation exercises. The results of major exercises are shared with the scrutiny co-ordinating group, to allow them to consider any issues which could highlight areas for scrutiny.

3. Public Engagement

a) Public Attendance and Speaking at Scrutiny Committees

Scrutiny committees are held in public and any member of the public may attend and listen to the debate. The public have no express right to speak in a meeting.

Some items are discussed in closed session, when they consider confidential information and have been declared as not for publication. There is no right of public attendance for these.

It is within the discretion of the Chair to determine any requests for public speaking at meetings. It is encouraged that as much notice as is possible is given for

requests to speak and the scrutiny team should be contacted in advance of the meeting.

The Chair will have the discretion to stop a public speaker at any time in proceedings if, in their view, the comments being made are defamatory, vexatious, discriminatory or offensive.

Agenda papers for all scrutiny committees are available via the Council's website or from the Guildhall, 3 clear working days before a meeting is held.

b) Public Involvement in Scrutiny Reports

Work programmes for each scrutiny committee, for the next 12 months, are available on the scrutiny web page.

Should any member of the public wish to contribute to a forthcoming item to a Scrutiny Committee they must consult with the relevant member of the Scrutiny Team. They must provide evidence that their contribution will improve the scrutiny of the item. The decision as to whether to allow the submission of such evidence and in what form is entirely at the discretion of the Chair.

Any written information will be required to be submitted at least 21 working days in advance of the meeting. Prior to publication it will be adjudged by the Chief Officer Governance & Customer whether the information is admissible and does not contravene any legal requirements e.g data protection laws.

c) Public Participation in Scrutiny Meetings

If an issue being considered by a scrutiny committee affects an identified member of the public or third party organisation, the committee may request that draft reports/information be shared and/or consulted upon where appropriate. Any comments or views then received will be submitted for the consideration of the committee.

In these circumstances, they will receive the agenda papers and may be invited to attend the meeting, provided that the issue is discussed in public.

Representatives of a third party or identified member of the public may be invited to attend to answer the Committee's questions relating to any comments and views they have provided.

d) Public Participation in Scrutiny – when the item is not published

When a report to be considered is not for publication, only elected members and those supporting the committee may be present and have copies of the agenda papers.

If a third party or a member of the public have contributed to the report, they can attend and answer any questions around their content. Following this they will be

required to leave the meeting while the report is debated. If further issues arise during debate, to which they may be requested to provide additional information, they may be invited to re-join the meeting.

e) Public request for an item to be considered for Scrutiny.

Should a member of the public or any third party wish to request an item for consideration by a scrutiny committee, they should consult with the relevant member of the scrutiny team.

They will be expected to complete a topic selection form supporting the request.

The HCCS will determine the validity of this request and if agreed identify the appropriate scrutiny committee for its consideration. When determining such requests it must be considered that they should not be vexatious and should not be construed as a means of lobbying or making a complaint.

The decision as to whether to allow the item to be placed on the forward work programme will be entirely at the discretion of the scrutiny committee.

If accepted onto the work programme, the member of the public will be invited to attend the meeting when the request is considered and subject to the Chairs approval be allowed to speak to support their request.

If the Committee is minded not to agree to the request it should produce clear reasons as to why.

If it is agreed the member of the public will be advised and informed when the issue is to be considered by the committee.

Details of further participation are listed in the preceding paragraphs

4 Welsh Language

When simultaneous translation equipment is made available at any public meetings then the Chair is required to make those present aware that the equipment has been provided and to encourage its use.

All scrutiny committee meetings, regardless of whether a member of the public has requested to speak in Welsh, are opened with a Welsh version of 'Welcome to the meeting' and closed with a Welsh 'Thank you for attending'.

Those invited to speak at a scrutiny committee meeting, will be required to give advance notice of 5 working days, indicating that they wish to speak in Welsh.

This will allow time for simultaneous translation equipment together with an interpreter to be provided.

5 Dealing with requests for co-option

Scrutiny committees can have members that are not Councillors.

A committee can co-opt members who have expertise or experience in an area which the committee would benefit from. Unless permitted by statute, they do not have a right to vote.

In the majority of circumstances it may be more appropriate for stakeholders to act as 'expert advisors' at specific scrutiny committee meetings.

Each scrutiny committee or subcommittee is entitled to recommend to Council the appointment of non-councillors as co-optees.

Members of the public wishing to seek co-option should contact the scrutiny team.

The Council has previously agreed that two Parent Governor and two representatives of the Churches, as defined in Section 499 of the Education Act 1996 be appointed to the scrutiny committee whose functions relate wholly or partly to education functions. These co-opted members have an entitlement to speak and vote on education issues.

The only other co-optees that could speak and vote are specified in the Crime and Disorder (Overview and Scrutiny) Regulations 2009.

6 Accessibility

Scrutiny meetings are predominantly held in the Guildhall, Wrexham, which is fully accessible and compliant with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

Where a venue other than the Guildhall, Wrexham is used for a scrutiny meeting, due consideration will be given to ensure that it is as accessible as possible.

7 Equality and Diversity

In order to ensure the widest consideration of forthcoming scrutiny work programmes and to allow additional consideration and access to meetings, these programmes are also shared with the Wrexham Equalities Network Group.