

Public Participation Strategy 2022-2027 (draft)

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Changes to this document

This document is reviewed regularly to keep up with changes in policy or legislation. The latest versions of our publications can be found on our website. Before contacting us about the content of this document, we recommend that you refer to the most recent version on the website and any relevant guidance.

Version	Date approved	Approved by	Notes / changes
1.0			
2.0			

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The purpose of this strategy

The purpose of this Public Participation Strategy is to set out how the Council aims to encourage local people to participate in Council decision-making.

It complements the existing Engagement Policy which gives guidance and support for officers and Councillors to carry out a range of public engagement and consultation activities.

Legislative Background

The Local Government and Elections Act (Wales) 2021 (hereafter referred to as The Act) requires principal Councils (of which Denbighshire County Council is one such Council) in Wales to develop and implement a Public Participation Strategy that in particular addresses:

- Ways of promoting awareness among local people of the principal council's functions;
- Ways of promoting awareness among local people of how to become a member of the principal council, and what membership entails;
- Ways of facilitating access for local people to information about decisions made, or to be made, by the principal council;
- Ways of promoting and facilitating processes by which local people may make representations to the principal council about a decision before, and after, it is made;
- Arrangements made, or to be made, for the purpose of the council's duty in section 62 of the 2011 Measure (bringing views of the public to attention of overview and scrutiny committees);
- Ways of promoting awareness among members of the principal council of the benefits of using social media to communicate with local people.

Principal Councils are required to consult with the local community in developing and reviewing the Public Participation Strategy. This strategy must be reviewed at least once after every ordinary local government election.

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Consultation requirements and key findings

The Act states (section 41.2) that *“In preparing that strategy the council must consult local people, and such other persons as it considers appropriate”*

To support the development of this strategy, Denbighshire County Council has carried out research over two separate projects:

1. Prior to the instigation of The Act, work was already being carried out by Denbighshire County Council under a project from the 2017-2022 Corporate Plan cycle. The project was called *People are involved in shaping and improving services*. This project aimed to investigate and address key concerns raised in previous Residents Surveys where respondents felt it was difficult to get involved in Council decision-making, and even if they did, respondents were not sure whether their involvement would make a difference. The eventual aim of the *People Are Involved...* project was to develop an Engagement Policy for the Council which would guide officers' thinking when creating and managing engagement and consultation projects, and bring transparency and consistency of approach to engagement activities carried out across the council. Research was carried out over three years to identify consistent requirements when consulting and engaging with the public.
2. Following the introduction of the Local Government Act (Wales) 2021 legislation, and the requirement to carry out a consultation to support the development of the Public Participation Strategy, additional research was carried out to address some 'knowledge gaps' required under the Act which was not covered by the work done on the Engagement Policy, such as the requirement to raise awareness on how to become a Councillor.

The research for both pieces of work was appointed to external researchers and included an independent audit of the council's existing activities, an online survey, and some street surveys where researchers would approach members of the public to ask them for their opinion. In terms of the surveys, both pieces of research received a combined total of 1,215 responses, of which approximately 750 were carried out as 'street surveys' (it should

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be noted however that due to the Covid pandemic one year's worth of surveys was conducted exclusively online)

In summary the data from both pieces of research showed that:

1. On average, around 75% of survey respondents wanted to get involved in decisions made which affect them
2. On average, around 73% of respondents felt that 'meaningful engagement' meant that they felt included, informed and listened to (even if the eventual decision made was not one they agreed with). Around 19% of respondents only felt that engagement would be meaningful if the council made a decision that they personally agreed with. Around 8% of respondents weren't sure or didn't have an opinion
3. There is more knowledge around what the Council does and how it impacts people's lives in the south of the County. This is likely to be because communities in rural Denbighshire are generally smaller and therefore the decisions the council makes will have a wider impact within that community.
4. This was reflected in the number of respondents who said they had attended a Council committee meeting (or knew it was possible to do this). In Corwen, over 50% of respondents surveyed said they had either attended a meeting or knew it was possible to do this, compared to Rhyl where 27% of respondents had either attended a meeting or knew it was possible to do this.
5. Respondents were generally not interested in becoming involved in decision-making to the extent that they would consider becoming a Councillor. Across the county fewer than 1 in 10 people thought this would be something they might like to do.
6. Reasons why people felt they might not become a Councillor included: being unsure what would be involved, not having a campaign issue/not being sure people would vote for them, they were too busy, too old, or unsure as to what level of commitment would be required, or the remuneration received was not proportionate to the responsibilities of being a Councillor.
7. In terms of the mechanisms by which respondents wanted to find out or get involved in decision-making which affects or impacts them:

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- a. Around 43% want the Council to write to them
 - b. Around 30% would like to attend a public information session or public meeting
 - c. Around 42% would like to see something on social media
 - d. Around 29% would like to see something on the Council's website
8. The important thing in terms of reaching people is to 'meet them where they are at' – letters (either email or post) as a means of direct contact are likely to be the most personal and most effective means of contacting people. Public meetings or information drop-ins should be as close to the target community as possible, rather than (for example) expecting people to visit the nearest Council office or other amenity to attend. To ensure both of these methods are effective, Council officers will need to have high levels of confidence before starting a project that they have accurately and adequately mapped all of their stakeholder groups and be confident they are approaching them via the most appropriate means.
9. A large number of respondents are on social media and would like to see it better used as a communication tool than it is currently. Further research may be needed to A/B test different mechanisms within social media (for example participation in local community groups/spaces on social media, versus paid advertising, versus standardised posts on the Council's own social media channels)

Our key approach aims

The following aims will set out how we intend to approach each requirement of the strategy.

Consistency

Our approach to involving local people in Council decision-making will be consistent.

Transparency

Our approach to involving local people in decision-making will be transparent, and people will understand why we may take a particular approach.

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Fairness

We will recognise the differences between 'equality' and 'equity' and work to ensure that nobody who wishes to be involved in Council decision-making is prevented from doing so due to their particular circumstances. Where this means that some people require more support to participate in Council decision-making, we will do our best to enable this wherever it is possible to do so.

Compliance with the act

This section will set out what the Council is currently doing, and where improvements can be identified, how we aim to carry out these improvements.

Ways of promoting awareness among local people of the principal council's functions

Denbighshire County Council's existing approach includes:

- The Council's website
- Press releases
- The social media channels Twitter and Facebook

To improve this, the Council will consider:

- People who are digitally excluded
- People using social media channels other than Twitter and Facebook
- Supporting local Councillors to take a more active role in promoting their own work

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Ways of promoting awareness among local people of how to become a member of the principal council, and what membership entails

Denbighshire County Council currently has a website page called 'Be A Councillor':

<https://www.denbighshire.gov.uk/en/your-council/voting-and-elections/be-a-councillor.aspx>

Ahead of election periods, this page is promoted via press release (which may be picked up in the local press) and via social media channels Facebook and Twitter

To improve this, the Council will:

- Regularly ask people how they would like to receive information – this is a standard item as part of the Council's Engagement Policy
- Ensure that the information is available in print or alternative format for people who are digitally excluded
- Continue to research how best to contact people, with specific considerations given to any circumstances which may be a barrier to their engagement

Ways of facilitating access for local people to information about decisions made, or to be made, by the principal council

The Council currently has an Engagement Policy which states that people must be able to obtain information:

- Online via any or all of the following:
 - The Council's main website
 - The County Conversation Portal
 - The Planning Portal
 - Via online drop-in or public meeting sessions (currently via Microsoft Teams)
- Offline via any or all of the following:
 - Information to be made available in local libraries
 - Information to be made available in the local press either by press release, advertisement or public notice

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- Where appropriate, via public information sessions (either drop-in or meeting)
- Where appropriate, by posting letters to those impacted by decisions, or by carrying out door-knocking

To improve this, the Council will:

- Regularly ask local people if the channels we are using to provide them with information are the right ones
- To regularly review our Engagement Policy in line with what people are telling us

Ways of promoting and facilitating processes by which local people may make representations to the principal council about a decision before, and after, it is made

The Council currently has an Engagement Policy which states that, where appropriate, people must be able to participate in local decision-making in (at least) the following ways:

- Online via any or all of the following:
 - The County Conversation Portal and associated citizen's panel *Y Panel*
 - The Planning Portal
 - Via online drop-in or public meeting sessions (currently via Microsoft Teams)
- Offline via any or all of the following:
 - By viewing consultation or engagement documents and completing feedback forms in local libraries or other venues as appropriate
 - Where appropriate, via public engagement or consultation drop-in sessions
 - Where appropriate, by facilitating discussions with specific communities or service users (e.g. focus groups)

To improve this, the Council will:

- Regularly ask local people if the channels we are using to engage with them and facilitate their participation are the right ones
- To regularly review our Engagement Policy in line with what people are telling us

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Arrangements made, or to be made, for the purpose of the council's duty in section 62 of the 2011 Measure (bringing views of the public to attention of overview and scrutiny committees)

The Council has arrangements in place to bring the views of the public to the attention of its three Scrutiny committees.

Members of the public may contact their local councillor, to raise issues through their councillor, or they can make a direct request using a 'Public Scrutiny Request Form', available from the Council's website on this page:

<https://www.denbighshire.gov.uk/en/your-council/about-the-council/how-the-council-works/scrutiny-committees.aspx>

The following criteria are used when considering whether a request is suitable for consideration by a Scrutiny Committee:

- Public interest – is the matter of concern to residents?
- Ability to have an impact – can Scrutiny influence and change things?
- Performance – is it an underperforming area or service?
- Extent – does it affect a large number of residents or a large geographic area?
- Replication – is anyone else looking at it?

To improve how scrutiny committees are brought to public attention and to improve the means by which members of the public can raise issues or concerns, the council will:

- Seek to promote Scrutiny committee meetings on corporate social media channels in advance of their taking place
- Look at creating a digital 'web form' version of the Public Scrutiny request form (which is currently a Microsoft Word document).

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Ways of promoting awareness among members of the principal council of the benefits of using social media to communicate with local people

Denbighshire County Council currently includes some basic social media training as part of its Members' Induction Process.

To improve this, the Council will:

- Consult with Councillors after every ordinary Council election to ascertain their current level of understanding about the social media channels available to them, and how these can complement the channels the Council uses
- Arrange regular social media training for Councillors:
 - At least once per year
 - After any extra-ordinary election or by-election
- Develop and publish a social media toolkit to support officers and Councillors