WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

Public Engagement in Local Government

I have prepared and published this report in accordance with
the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004.

The Wales Audit Office study team that assisted me in preparing this report
comprised Kate Ashburner, Andy Bruce, Gwilym Bury, Louise Fleet, Helen Keatley,
Michael Palmer and John Weston under the direction of Alan Morris.

Huw Vaughan Thomas
Auditor General for Wales
Wales Audit Office
24 Cathedral Road
Cardiff
CF11 9LJ

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Introduction

1 Public engagement is the process by which organisations invite 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'.[1]

2 Government policy in Wales emphasises the importance of effective public engagement. Engagement is widely seen as a crucial aspect of ensuring that all organisations in Wales develop a more 'citizen-focused' approach to the design and delivery of their policies, programmes and services.

3 Councils in Wales can derive particular benefits from effective public engagement as it plays an important role in the democratic process. By gathering information on the attitudes and behaviour of citizens, it has a direct influence on policy or service outcomes. Effective public engagement:

- 'increases public confidence in local government activity;

- provides evidence on which to base decisions;

- helps give a voice to wide sections of society (including those that have previously been marginalised); and

- ensures that resources are targeted more effectively.' [2]

4 Over the last eight years, key Welsh Government strategies have sought to influence local government to engage more effectively with the public. In the 2004 document, *Making the connections: delivering beyond the boundaries*, the Welsh Government gives a clear lead in terms of the importance of public engagement. The document states: '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.' The Welsh Government's current Sustainable Development Scheme, *One Wales: One Planet* has 'Involvement' as one of only two core principles. *One Wales: One Planet* states: 'People and communities are at the heart of sustainable development, so we will be inclusive in our involvement of all our stakeholders in the development of our policies and programmes.'

5 In addition, Local Service Boards' European Social Fund initiatives support the development of effective citizen and community engagement to improve service design and delivery. The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 emphasises the importance of public engagement and, within the proposals for the development of Single Integrated Plans[3], Local Service Boards are expected to include an engagement strategy to help develop and monitor key objectives.

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1   Definition taken from *Public Agenda* website, 2010.

2   Source: COI *Effective Public Engagement*, 2009.

3   Also referred to as Single Delivery Plans.

6 Whilst the importance of public engagement is emphasised in a number of key Welsh Government strategies, such as Children and Young People and Older Persons, there is no comprehensive national strategy for public engagement in Wales. The Scottish Government introduced *National Standards for Community Engagement* in May 2005, together with a dedicated website to support its public-sector organisations in developing, implementing and evaluating public engagement activity.[4] Following the 'Making the Connections' recommendation, the Welsh Government delegated the task of consulting and drafting the national principles for public engagement in Wales to Participation Cymru, to ensure a common understanding of the nature of effective public engagement[5]. The national principles were launched by Participation Cymru in June 2011.

7 Public-sector organisations in Wales are facing the challenge of approximately £1.6 billion being cut from their budgets between 2010-11 and 2013-14. Having to face such difficult economic choices and decisions heightens the need for councils to engage effectively with the public. The Auditor General for Wales stated in his report, *Picture of Public Services 2011*: 'Leaders will need to engage the public as much as possible in debates about the future shape of local services, and explain the rationale for the changes.'

8 This study examined whether public engagement undertaken by councils in Wales enables citizens to help shape what local government does. The Wales Audit Office developed and applied a common methodology (see Appendix 1) across all 22 councils in Wales.

9 We concluded that Welsh councils are involved in a great deal of public engagement, some of which enables citizens to help shape services. Public engagement activity frequently lacks strategic direction and co-ordination; feedback is rarely provided to the public and monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the public engagement are weak.

10 We came to this conclusion because:

- councils undertake a great deal of public engagement, some of which enables citizens to help shape local services;

- most councils have not yet fully embedded and mainstreamed public engagement into their organisational culture and partnership activities; and

- councils rarely provide feedback on what difference public engagement has made, and monitoring and evaluation are weak.

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4   In Scotland, the National Standards for Community Engagement are used to articulate the nature of effective public engagement and what improvements need to be made to the planning and implementation of public engagement. They also provide a framework to analyse experiences and identify areas for improvement.

5   The Public Engagement Principles were launched in June 2011 by Participation Cymru, an organisation which is funded by the Welsh Government to establish good practice and provide training for the public sector in public participation (see Appendix 3 for contact details).

Summary of key findings

Councils undertake a great deal of public engagement, some of which enables citizens to help shape services

1 All of the 22 local councils in Wales undertake public engagement activity, primarily focusing on informing and consulting the public about local services. Councils are developing their approaches to public engagement at different rates and in different ways. These differences are primarily due to variations in how councils prioritise public engagement and in the capacity and resources they have available to undertake engagement activity. There is also a variation in the quality and amount of public engagement undertaken. There is evidence to show that some of the public engagement activity does have a positive impact and results in discernible changes to local government services.

2 Councils use a wide variety of methods to inform and consult the public, but currently tend to focus on the more traditional, low-technology methods, such as using media and press, printed material, formal and informal meetings, questionnaires, service-related contact and information campaigns. Nevertheless, the use of electronic communications is growing, including social media and mobile-telephone technology. Websites are used extensively to store and provide access to information for the public and are considered to be an efficient means of reaching the greatest number of people. Councils continue to focus on using websites for various activities, such as service interaction, providing news and updates and opportunities for the public to participate in consultations. There are examples of innovative ideas to try to attract different sectors of the population, such as websites specifically designed to encourage younger people to become involved. However, as over a third of the population are unable to access websites due to a lack of broadband or computer equipment, traditional broadcast and print media continue to be important communication methods for local authorities.

3 We have identified a number of issues which can impact on the effectiveness of councils' approach to public engagement. These include a lack of knowledge of the most successful methods for informing and consulting local communities and whether they are of sufficient quality, are cost effective and appropriate for an area and its population. Also, councils do not take sufficient advantage of their current systems and services which interact daily with the public, by using them to inform, consult and generally communicate with the public.

4 We found few practical examples of more collaborative forms of engagement that encourage and allow the public to participate in decision making, shape the implementation of services or have greater autonomy to organise their own community services. However, all councils are building closer working relations with the public, via formal 'forums', both to discover and maintain knowledge of the key concerns facing certain

members of the community, such as older people and children and young people. Also, there are examples of closer working with individual communities to address difficult or controversial issues, to encourage and retain a degree of public involvement so that residents can participate in decisions and services impacting on their own communities.

5   Some councils also recognise that effective public engagement plays a critical role in supporting the most vulnerable members of the community. Such activity can include working with families or individuals to identify problems and agree actions to resolve them; or working with groups and communities to try to address social issues such as unemployment, drug or alcohol dependency. Such engagement activities were considered by these councils as key to helping improve the capability and confidence of the participants. However, this was frequently anecdotal because monitoring and evaluation are generally weak.

Most councils have not yet fully embedded and mainstreamed public engagement into their organisational culture and partnership activities

6   The majority of councils express some degree of commitment towards undertaking public engagement activity. However, there appears less of an understanding and commitment towards developing a more open and participatory culture. Moreover, in many instances this commitment has not evolved into robust political and managerial leadership providing clear direction for and prioritisation of the development of effective public engagement. This lack of direction

impacts on the establishment of corporate structures and functions designed to support public engagement. For instance, defining the role of councillors within public engagement activity and clarifying how public participation impacts on the governance arrangements of an authority, which currently focuses on the role of elected representatives. Some concerns were raised by councillors regarding how participation will impact on the current democratic structures.

7   Although approximately a third of the councils are beginning to develop a more strategic and planned approach to public engagement, the majority still lack clear ideas on their overall plans and intentions. Consequently, they lacked in-depth awareness of the benefits of public engagement; what outcomes they should be seeking; and how should the Council organise itself to establish a corporate approach to planning, co-ordinating, and implementing effective engagement.

8   We found numerous examples of specific public engagement projects undertaken by councils in conjunction with partner public sector organisations, mainly from Local Service Boards[6]. Councils clearly recognise the benefits of joint working with partners, including the avoidance of over-consulting the public. The joint engagement exercises are usually focused on specific themes, such as health and wellbeing, community safety or transport. However, Local Service Boards have not yet developed a fully strategic approach to public engagement by, for instance, clarifying their roles, co-ordinating disparate agendas, and developing and agreeing joint outcomes. A small number of councils are in the process of developing a Local Service Board-wide strategy for public engagement for their area. There are also a few examples of councils working with

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6   Local Service Boards are where the leaders of local public and third-sector organisations come together to take collective action to ensure public services are effective and citizen focused.

neighbouring authorities, town and community councils and the voluntary sector to plan, resource or implement public engagement, but they are currently few in number and in the initial stages only. However, the new legislation introducing the Single Delivery or Integrated Plan[7], emphasises the role of the 'citizen voice' as a driver for service improvement and 'should have a significant impact on accelerating the development of more co-ordinated and area-wide approaches to public engagement'.

Councils rarely provide feedback on what difference public engagement has made, and monitoring and evaluation are weak

9   We found that many councils do not collect enough data to ensure that they have a complete picture of public engagement activity undertaken corporately and throughout their services. Neither do they thoroughly and comprehensively analyse and use the data accumulated through public engagement activity. Very few councils have adequate corporate databases to store all the information they gather. Services frequently keep their own databases that are often incompatible with corporate or other service systems and impede the sharing of data.

10   Many councils struggle to demonstrate benefits arising from their public engagement because they do not have robust mechanisms to develop outcomes and measures or review their processes. A lack of clear and agreed outcomes, supported by performance measures, makes it difficult for councils to meaningfully assess the effectiveness of their public engagement. We found many councils stating that such outcomes measuring quality and impact of public engagement are not easy to formulate. However, several councils are now developing such measures, some using results based accountability[8], to help identify more tangible outcomes. Councils, however, are not drawing on the skills of their specialist performance management staff to help develop these outcomes, as much as they should, to ensure that performance measures and outcomes are closely linked to key corporate or improvement objectives.

11   The lack of central data-collection systems and analysis of public engagement activity impairs the quality of performance management, reporting and scrutiny of public engagement activities. Thus councils are less able to closely assess and scrutinise the quality and impact of their public engagement activities. Similarly, councils do not collect sufficient information to be in a position to assess the value for money of public engagement. Few councils record or analyse the true cost of public engagement in terms of budget and resources or produce a credible cost/benefit analysis which could help to develop a rationale for service charges and costs.[9]

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7   The introduction of 'single integrated plans' (also referred to as 'single delivery plans') intends to replace the four existing statutory plans and strategies, thereby reducing complexity and duplication, and freeing up resources, and improving the outcomes of people living in their communities. Its development must be underpinned by a willingness to engage citizens in the process to rethink, redesign and implement system-wide changes. (Welsh Government *Shared Purpose, Shared Delivery* 2012.)

8   Results-based accountability or RBA is a disciplined way of thinking and taking action communities can use to improve the lives of children, families and the community as a whole. RBA can also be used by agencies to improve the performance of their programmes. There are many examples of it being used in Wales and the rest of the UK, as well as internationally, to change people's lives for the better in terms of both whole communities and groups of service users. More information can be found on http://www.raguide.org/

9   Research into costing public engagement: *Making the case for public engagement: How to demonstrate the value of consumer input* by Edward Andersson, Emily Fennell and Thea Shahrokh.

12 Even among the better-performing councils, feedback of findings and outcomes from such engagement to the public is a key weakness. Councils are not providing well-drafted and thorough feedback to the public, including participants, to demonstrate the impact of the engagement activity and to clearly demonstrate that they have listened to, considered and acted upon the information and views provided by citizens.

13 The lack of robust outcomes and performance measures hampers the ability of councils to interpret and demonstrate changes and improvements to services to the public. Most councils lack corporate standards and agreed processes on how to provide feedback. They are also unclear about who has overall editorial control to develop user-friendly feedback in a format which is understandable and relates to real outcomes such as service or policy changes. Finally, the public themselves are rarely given the chance to comment on the design, suitability and effectiveness of public engagement activity.

Recommendations

Recommendations

In the context of major financial challenges and key Welsh strategies containing an increased expectation of greater opportunities for public engagement, the following recommendations are designed to help local authorities develop a more effective and efficient approach to their public engagement activities.

We found that councils undertake a great deal of public engagement activity, some of which enables citizens to help shape local government services. However, local authorities' public engagement activity is at different stages of development and maturity and a key issue is that that there are inconsistencies in effectiveness, efficiency and quality. We therefore recommend that:

R1   Councils should make use of the wide range of guidance and good practice available to improve the quality and consistency of their public engagement activity. To ensure they improve the experience for citizens, and get a better return on their investment in public engagement, councils should:
- **make use of support mechanisms such as Participation Cymru;**
- **adopt the ten National Principles of public engagement; and**
- **draw upon widely available good practice.**

A critical factor influencing the development of an effective and meaningful approach to public engagement is the degree to which leaders demonstrate a commitment towards a more open and participatory organisational culture. As most councils have not yet fully embedded and mainstreamed public engagement into their organisational culture and partnership activities, we recommend that:

R2   Councils should establish and mainstream a culture which empowers citizens to co-produce services, as well as develop their own responses to the opportunities and challenges facing their communities.

R3   In response to the proposals for a Single Integrated Plan, councils should take the opportunity to work with other public bodies to develop a strategic and co-ordinated approach to public engagement. Increased collaboration will enable councils to provide more effective and efficient engagement by sharing resources, reducing duplication and lessening the risk of engagement fatigue.

R4   Councils should consider ways to improve their systems for the collection and storage of public engagement data, both across the councils' activities and collaboratively with Local Service Boards (using established data systems wherever possible).

Recommendations

The effectiveness of public engagement is more often measured by councils in terms of processes and numerically based targets. There is a need for councils to be clearer about how public engagement will contribute to both service user outcomes and community outcomes. This, in turn, will mean that measures of success are focused on what has been improved and achieved through engagement activity. We therefore recommend that:

R5   Councils should strengthen the rationale, purpose and validity of their public engagement activity by developing an outcome-based approach. This will help clarify what outcomes and targets a council needs to achieve through public engagement activity and help identify appropriate approaches and methods.

A common issue affecting the majority of councils is the lack of useful and meaningful feedback given to the public on what has changed as a result of public engagement. There is also a lack of awareness, within councils, of how this lack of communication is perceived by members of the public. Councils also need to be able to clearly demonstrate to citizens what changes have been made to services, policies and projects as a result of public engagement. We therefore recommend that:

R6   Councils should seek ways to improve the quality and timeliness of feedback to engagement participants and the general public, clearly communicating what has and what has not changed as a result of the engagement activity.

Although many councils do use monitoring techniques and targets to try to assess how well they undertake public engagement, more can be done to ascertain the effectiveness and quality of engagement activity and whether it has achieved the desired outcomes. We recommend that:

R7   Councils should introduce or modify their current performance management arrangements, to make clear what improvements and outcomes they wish to achieve and to improve the quality of monitoring and evaluation.

R8   Councils should ensure that they are able to capture and report key performance management information on public engagement, including: its impact on policy and services; equality impact assessments; participant feedback; and the number and range of participants. In reporting this data clear links should be made with a council's key priorities and improvement objectives.

Section 1
Councils undertake a great deal of public engagement, some of which enables citizens to help shape services

Councils undertake a great deal of public engagement, some of which enables citizens to help shape services

1.1 In this section of the report we consider:

a how effective councils are in keeping the public informed, including the use of social media and new technology;

b the extent to which councils focus on the consultation process without considering more useful or practical alternatives; and

c how well developed are the more collaborative forms of engagement.

Councils use a range of methods to inform and consult the public; however, standards vary

Exhibit 1: Informing and consulting the public

Councils need to provide clear and concise *information* that the public can easily access and understand. This information, from public health information to local planning, from leisure activities to service changes, is important to the public and they have a right to expect that councils will try to provide news and information in ways that are convenient for them. Furthermore, good information is key to 'successful community involvement' which 'is based upon information and dialogue. Only an informed community can be part of the decision-making process.'[10]

Councils also need to *consult* the public when appropriate and meaningful, to provide opportunities for the public to voice opinions on service and policy issues and help influence any change or new development. A popular definition of consultation is that it is 'a structured public engagement which involves seeking, receiving, analysing and responding to feedback from stakeholders'. Consultation is about seeking the views of those outside the decision-making process, in order to better inform that process.[11]

However, consultation may have limitations, as the process allows 'a choice between pre-determined options, without the opportunity to propose alternatives'.[12]

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10 SMARTE.org August 2010. SMARTe or *Sustainable Management Approaches and Revitalisation Tools – electronic* is a website which contains ideas and tools to help communities take an active role in the regeneration and 'revitalisation' of their area.

11 CER Business Information Centre, Eire, 7 September 2007, CER/07/140.

12 Excerpt from *A Ladder of Participation* (Wilcox 1999).

Most councils continue to use well-established methods to keep the public informed

1.2   Although there is an increase in the use of electronic communications and social media to inform the public, most councils still depend on the more well-established, low technology methods. This approach is essential to ensure that the public is provided with choice and opportunity to access information, and because approximately 35 per cent of the population[13] of Wales are unable to use electronic forms of communication. These are the main ways in which councils inform their public:

a   Council and Local Service Board newsletters remain a widely used tool to inform council residents, as are leaflets and publicity material which are distributed through council offices, properties and libraries. However, little evaluation has been undertaken of the effectiveness of printed materials as information tools. Local newspapers can also be a source of information, with paid-for public notices, whereas some councils provide regular contributions from senior management or councillors. For example, in Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council the Chief Executive or Leader of the Council provide updates on the Council's activities.

b   'Word of mouth' is still recognised, especially by councillors, as a popular way of informing the public. Councillors' surgeries and meetings or daily contact between frontline council staff and the public provide a common route for conveying service information. In Caerphilly County Borough Council, refuse collectors are requested to actively inform residents of service changes whilst doing their rounds. Although little evaluation is undertaken by councils on how well information is passed on to the public, anecdotes from officers and councillors report that it helps build good relations with the public.

c   Contact centres are becoming an established channel to inform the public and, in turn, to receive public enquiries and complaints on services and policies. Members of the public are offered options to contact the centres by telephone or call in person. Some councils try to locate contact centres to make them more accessible to the public, but this cannot always be the case as there is a dependency on the availability and suitability of council venues. Councils mostly have to use the assets and resources already in their possession.

d   'Road-show' style events are also increasingly being used. Such events offer opportunities for face-to-face dialogue with the public who can, in turn, obtain information and answers directly from officers and councillors. 'Road shows' can also be organised jointly with Local Service Board partners; for example, fire and rescue services have worked with health, housing and social care services to promote safety in the home.

e   Marketing campaigns and events can inform the public about specific service change, or to promote suggested changes in public behaviour and attitude. A good example is the 'Love where you live' campaign by Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, which promotes recycling, litter avoidance and encourages young people and their communities to look after their environment. However, such campaigns can be resource intensive and it is sometimes difficult to identify the outcomes achieved.

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13   According to the latest figures from Ofcom's *Communications Market Report for Wales 2010*, 64 per cent of people have access to broadband in Wales, ranging from 62 per cent in urban areas to 69 per cent in rural areas of Wales. This is below the UK average of 71 per cent. Updated June 2011.

More use is being made of websites and social media both to inform and interact with the public

1.3 Websites are viewed by councils as a key method of keeping the public informed and to enhance and extend opportunities to consult or interact. The key drivers for the use of websites include: a desire to inform and engage new audiences including younger people; the cost effective use of relatively small resources to reach and inform a wider audience; and the ease of updating information and issuing urgent messages. Some of this progress has been partnership driven, with support and resources provided by Local Service Board partners. However, there remains a wide variation between council websites, both in terms of the quality and accessibility of information and language, and their ability to 'engage' and consult the public.

1.4 As part of the study, we carried out a brief review of council websites and concluded that they are generally effective in: providing useful information to the public on service and operational matters; obtaining public feedback on service quality through complaints and comments; enabling people to pay for services; and reporting problems. Although the current focus of council websites is to *inform* the public, more councils are using their websites to encourage the public to send in *their* views and experiences via 'tell us what you think' items on their websites, to build up a picture of current public opinion and concerns.

1.5 Councils also seek views on the effectiveness of their websites by using the SOCITM[14] Insight surveys which seek to evaluate the quality of councils' websites by asking users to comment on various categories and criteria such as access and usability. The

SOCITM organisation provides reports[15] on the efficiency and success of council websites throughout Wales and England, making recommendations which councils can act upon to improve their websites.

1.6 About two-thirds of councils are using their websites to regularly consult the public, some extensively, with perhaps three or four consultations occurring at any one time. A smaller number of councils are collaborating with Local Service Board partners, co-ordinating joint consultation opportunities and creating consultation 'portals'[16]. In some cases, portals are more effective in providing consultation information than the council's own website. The portals can include current as well as past and proposed consultations, and are designed to maximise opportunities for the public to participate in consultation and to 'have their say'. Examples include *Ask Cardiff*, where the Council, with its Local Service Board partners, has developed a website dedicated to consultation. The website offers the public opportunities to participate in and contribute to a debate on a number of issues affecting the Council, Health Board, police and other public bodies. There are also other examples including Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council's *Talking NPT*. We found that very few councils use websites to feed back their consultation findings, publish the outcomes of surveys or to thank participants; but councils with portals in place state that such work is in progress.

1.7 A small number of councils are beginning to use their websites to encourage more specialist participation. Scrutiny sites are being promoted to raise awareness on how the public can become involved and participate in the scrutiny and overview processes. For example, Bridgend County

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14   SOCITM is the Society of Information Technology Managers, the professional organisation for public-sector ICT management.

15   Latest report from SOCITM *Better connected 2010: a snapshot of all local authority websites* or contact www.socitm.net/insight

16   A web 'portal' is a term, often used interchangeably with 'gateway', for a worldwide website the purpose of which is to be a major starting point for users when they connect to the web. They can be either general or specialised/niche portals such as for public engagement activities.

Borough Council asks the public to suggest future topics for scrutiny or to submit views on topics being investigated by scrutiny committees. There are also examples of dedicated websites to promote public engagement with young people. For example, in the development of strategies for children and young people, several specialist websites have been launched to encourage young people to contribute ideas, such as *Youth4You* in Caerphilly.

1.8 Although the increase in information and numbers of consultations on websites usually indicates a willingness to engage with the public, there are a number of issues regarding the use of websites as tools for public engagement:

a There is currently no major evidence or research available which ascertains whether websites do indeed improve communication or increase levels of public participation. However, a small number of councils are now beginning to ask their residents how they would like to be informed or consulted, to help assess whether websites or social networking can be forces to improve the quality and levels of participation.

b A factor common to all councils is the increasing amount of information contained on their websites. There is pressure to continually add more information, with councils promoting their services, publicising changes to their policies and strategies, and providing their latest news. Poor layout and signposting of this large amount of information often make websites difficult to navigate.

c Councils are making increasing use of web-based consultations and surveys and these are becoming more advanced technologically. However, website consultations are often poorly promoted and many councils experience low response rates. Such promotion is particularly important if the subject matter is non specific and does not directly affect communities or service delivery, for example, consultations on corporate or improvement objectives. Additionally, there are few examples where consultation opportunities have been targeted at a specific audience to ensure that the appropriate people were made aware of their existence and encouraged to participate.

d Councils frequently state the intention that they will use information from consultations to inform decisions and shape policy to reflect residents' priorities. However, follow-up information and feedback to the public are often lacking or ineffective in showing the consequences and outcomes of a consultation or engagement activity and its impact on subsequent decisions. (See also Section 3 on the issue of feedback.)

1.9 In general, we found that websites frequently lack ways to allow the public to interact with councils on a daily basis, to raise queries or to express points of view on current issues and topics. However, the development of social networking sites by some councils provides a possible answer to this deficiency. Social networking sites, which can be linked with council websites, can provide alternative methods of communication, engagement and interaction with residents, and help to save costs as they are usually relatively inexpensive to operate.

1.10 Social-networking sites such as *Facebook*[17] and *Twitter*[18], together with 'blogs', are being used more frequently by councils to encourage dialogue with the public on various issues, to varying degrees of success. Some are project based and are sometimes used to support traditional consultation methods or events, providing an alternative means to engage. Others are permanent, enabling the public to provide comment on a variety of issues. Also *Twitter* exchanges are used to warn and inform the public of immediate news such as changes to services or adverse weather conditions.

1.11 Similarly, mobile-phone text messages are also being used to inform members of the public who registered a request for ongoing news and events, such as notification of road works or blocked roads due to snow. In Cardiff, the 'webcasting'[19] of Council meetings allows the public to listen and watch the meetings in progress. The public can also follow the meetings through *Twitter*. This development appears to be the first example of this approach in Wales, although there are a number of similar examples in England.

Case study: Caerphilly County Borough Council – 'Weather warning' webpage information

To help school pupils and their parents avoid unnecessary travel in adverse weather, the Council has a dedicated webpage providing early warning information on severe weather, school closures and service disruption. Used primarily in winter, the system differs from the traditional severe-weather warning and information sites as it is updated by head teachers on a real-time basis and is password protected. The information can then be used and accessed from home and mobile computer technology.

The webpage can help parents plan journeys, arrange childcare and make appropriate travelling arrangements in dangerous weather conditions. The webpage is also used by the media, as the only 'bona fide' confirmed source of information for reporting on school closures. Devised by the Council's web development team in association with communications and school safety teams, the system was fully launched in November 2011. It has since been extended to nursery care providers and social services establishments. To date, its success has been measured by how well and timely the information is entered into the web by schools and the positive feedback from children and parents who have used the system.

Case study: City and County of Cardiff – webcasting Council meetings

Since September 2008, Cardiff Council has been broadcasting Council meetings live on its website. Webcasts of meetings are also archived on the website so that they can be accessed and viewed at a later date. The website holds the previous 12 months' meetings although viewing of earlier meetings can be arranged upon request. Since the broadcast of Council meetings started, average live views have doubled and archived views have increased by 300 per cent (www.cardiff.gov.uk/webcasting).

The decision to webcast Council meetings has enabled Cardiff residents and any other interested parties to view meetings online, with the objective of making Council proceedings accessible and transparent to a wider audience. The archived webcasts also provide an accurate record of each meeting. In conjunction with webcasting, the online team also 'tweet' agenda points, updates and links to documents throughout the meeting and respond to queries. 'Twitter' activity during meetings has been rising slowly as more members of the public become aware of this avenue for engagement.

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17 'Facebook' is a social networking website that was originally designed for college students, but is now open to anyone 13 years of age or older.

18 'Twitter' is a very popular instant messaging system that lets a person send brief text messages of up to 140 characters to a list of followers. 'Tweeting' is a term which describes an online posting, short message or 'micro-blog' created by a Twitter user.

19 Webcasting is the use of the internet to broadcast live or delayed audio and/or video transmissions, much like traditional television and radio broadcasts. Users typically must have the appropriate multimedia computer application in order to view a webcast.

Consulting is the predominant public engagement activity although councils do use other methods to varying degrees of success

1.12 We found that most councils have fairly well established processes for consultation using a number of methods (as outlined in Paragraph 1.18). Some councils have developed corporate guidelines or practical 'toolkits', either produced by themselves or in partnership with their Local Service Board.

1.13 Nineteen of the 22 councils[20] also employ specialist officers who, either full time or part time, generally undertake corporate consultation projects. They can also provide advice and support to service-based consultation activities. From our evidence, there is a fairly strong correlation between the number of councils that are in the process of developing a more strategic approach (admittedly all at differing stages – from well developed to very initial, exploratory stages) and the number who employ a full-time specialist officer.

1.14 Councils are currently required to undertake a number of statutory consultations. These include: the development of their improvement objectives; the Local Development Plan; the Heath Social Care and Wellbeing Strategy; children and young people's services; and school modernisation programmes.

1.15 Statutory consultation processes are now well established in most councils, but response rates are frequently very poor. A small number of councils seek to make these statutory consultations more relevant to the public by linking them to specific community issues or being more innovative with the consultation approach. However, in many councils there are missed opportunities to use these statutory consultations to establish standards of good practice and to pilot innovation.

1.16 Even for the non-statutory services, consultations are considered, by the majority of councils, to be the predominant public engagement activity. They are seen to be a key stage in helping to promote understanding and to gauge popular opinion on proposed policy or service changes.

1.17 With regard to the type of consultations used, we found that most councils tend to use the more traditional methods such as surveys and questionnaires. A number of factors contributed to this, including a preference to play safe and a lack of resources, expertise and capacity to be more innovative. As with the statutory consultations, public response rates are often low, which councils consider to be a possible indication of the public's indifference towards opportunities to participate. However, we found that councils frequently do not embark on a pre-consultation publicity campaign to raise awareness of the consultation's existence. Such campaigns can: widen the appeal of and generate interest in the consultation; emphasise the purpose of the consultation/engagement; stress how important public opinion is to the decisions to be made; and explain the role members of the public play in the process.

1.18 The following are the most popular type of consultation:

a Citizens panels are still fairly commonplace and councils tend to use them as first points of call to obtain public views. However, we found that some councils are considering phasing them out, as they are becoming too resource intensive and may not reflect popular opinion as they are not a true cross-section of a local population profile.

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20   Correct at time of fieldwork.

b Surveys vary widely in type and purpose; they include residents surveys, undertaken approximately every two to four years, to gather the views of as many local people as possible on a variety of issues such as a council's current performance levels and/or future strategic plans. Corporate surveys and/or consultation events which focus on a single, significant or critical issue such as budget prioritisation or the development of the 'single integrated plan'[21]. A planned programme of targeted surveys is being used increasingly by some councils to help build up a continuous body of data. This ongoing process of consultation and engagement helps to inform and validate councils' improvement objectives or community strategy themes.

c Groups, public meetings and road shows are often used as precursors to inform those taking part in a consultation process of the key issues; or as standalone consultation events. Focus groups or forums concentrate on a particular theme or objective and are either one-off or an ongoing arrangement. Road-shows and exhibitions are growing in popularity and have been used to discuss the prioritisation of budgets or improvement objectives. The presence of chief officers and councillors at these events is seen by some interviewees as improving a council's credibility to seek out and listen to public opinion.

d 'Face-to-face' encounters are examples of a more 'personal touch' and include council officers knocking on doors to garner support for, or views on, specific services, such as recycling or warden services for sheltered housing. Another example of this approach is peer consultation. In Bridgend young people are being specially trained by the Council to consult their peers in neighbouring councils on issues concerning the Children and Young People Strategy and with very young children (see next case study). The Council felt that the young people consulted would be more likely to 'open up' to people in their own age group.

e Service design and delivery: call centres are sometimes used to ask the views of a few hundred people by telephone to provide a more immediate 'temperature gauge' of current opinion on a particular service issue. Business process re-engineering, where a service is analysed stage by stage to see how it can be improved, is being seen by a small number of councils as an opportunity to involve the public. Users are involved to help redesign a service and so can directly influence what outcomes they consider should be achieved through service delivery.

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21 The introduction of 'single integrated plans' (also referred to as 'single delivery plans') intends to replace the four existing statutory plans and strategies, thereby reducing complexity and duplication, and freeing up resources, and improving the outcomes of people living in their communities. Its development must be underpinned by a willingness to engage citizens in the process to rethink, redesign and implement system-wide changes. (Welsh Government *Shared Purpose, Shared Delivery* 2012.)

Case study: Bridgend County Borough Council – Training young people as interviewers to engage with younger children

Public engagement is led by the Assistant Chief Executive and is supported by officers in the Corporate Improvement Team. The Council's Children and Young Peoples' Strategy is developing effective consultation arrangements for very young children, which includes training young people as interviewers. The Council has commissioned research on consultation with pre-school children to help develop its consultation methods for this age group.

Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs' Development Officer, in partnership with Genesis (Bridgend) and Bridgend's Children and Young People Strategy, undertook a review of existing literature on children's participation methods. A questionnaire was issued to 175 childcare settings across Bridgend County Borough, via the Family Information Service, to establish what methods were currently being used to involve children in decision-making. Selected from the questionnaire responses, observations were made at five representative childcare settings. A consultation exercise was undertaken at the Bridgend Funday in April 2009. Selected participation methods were piloted in five childcare settings.

Examples of more collaborative forms of engagement, including 'working together' and community 'empowerment' are fairly rare but in some cases they have had a positive impact on service delivery and communities

1.19 More collaborative forms of engagement can take different forms:

a deciding together – where people and councils work together to share views, generate options jointly, and agree a course of action;

b acting together – people working with councils to make decisions and help carry through the action agreed; and

c supporting local initiatives – in which councils support groups to develop and implement their own solutions – that is, empowerment.[22]

Exhibit 2: The importance of close collaborative working

Close collaborative working is important as:

'involving local people in designing and developing services brings greater creativity and innovation... successful community involvement works across the board for all community groups and so improves access to services for marginalised and vulnerable people'.

'By being customer focused and engaging with the community, your council can provide the most appropriate services for your customers with the finite resources at your disposal. Being close to and engaging with your community will help local people to be aware of the limits of your resources and the tough decisions you may need to take. It is also important that if you decide not to provide a particular service you communicate the reasons for your decisions.[23]

22   Excerpt from *A Ladder of Participation* (Wilcox 1999).

23   From *Benefits of investing in community empowerment*, March 2010, IDeA.gov.uk

Themed forums and groups are now a well-established means of participation in most councils

1.20 Councils use mechanisms such as themed groups and forums to encourage greater collaboration with the public and to help them enter more fully into debate over policy development and service provision. Such groups are well established in most councils and have become an important element of in-depth consultation and occasional collaboration. Providing an opportunity for volunteers to suggest solutions to local problems, they help promote the interests of certain sectors of the population such as youth and older people.

1.21 A few councils have arranged for such groups to meet with their Cabinet or Scrutiny Committee on a regular basis to submit views and ideas. This arrangement is important to encourage longer-term and continued engagement with the groups and forums, and to reassure the participants that their contributions are seen to influence the decision-making process.

1.22 Maintaining such groups requires significant investment by councils, both in terms of staff support and funding. This investment ensures that a group has the capacity and capability to be effective. Group participants are likely to be highly motivated and well informed, and often the turnover is low and so they are retained on the group for some time. Some councils 'refresh' group membership every four years or so in order to encourage new volunteers.

1.23 However, concerns have been voiced by interviewees, from both partner organisations, and within councils, regarding the representative nature of such groups, as participants are volunteers and so cannot be considered to formally 'represent' any views of their communities. The groups tend not to have formal terms of reference which could help clarify their role, remit and limitations. In Scotland, the Government has developed Ten Standards of community engagement. Launched in 2005, the Standards have been promoted to help Scottish community groups and organisations assess their own role and practice as effective agents of community engagement.

1.24 Overall, the impact of themed groups and forums in Wales generally appears to be a positive one. They are considered by councils to be useful points of contact to test public opinion on a pertinent service or community-related issue and members of forums interviewed stated that they found the experience to be interesting and worthwhile. But we consider it important that these initiatives complement wider and more representative engagement.

There are examples where councils are using engagement activity which could have a positive impact on the capability and confidence of people and their communities

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Exhibit 3: The Kafka Brigade – pilot studies in four Welsh councils

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The Kafka Brigade is an independent, non-profit making research team which focuses on the experiences of particular citizens to help diagnose and remedy key problems in service provision. It uses 'action research methods to draw general lessons from an individual citizen's case in order to help determine where and why bureaucracy has broken down'. Four councils in Wales took part in pilot projects looking at specific service situations where improvements were needed. In Bridgend, the focus was on the transition for young people with disabilities from child-centred services to adult services; Cardiff and Swansea focused on services for young people 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET); and Rhondda Cynon Taf applied the Kafka method to the area of domestic abuse. The key conclusions arising from the pilot projects included the following:

- that citizen-centric service re-design can be an effective way to solve difficult issues;

- the importance of disciplined input, leadership and direction from senior officers and political leads in creating buy-in, encouraging ongoing commitment by example and to give confidence to staff to be bold and innovative;

- the value of formalising accountability and oversight at an early stage – the importance of identifying what individual/organisation was charged with ownership of the project, and overseeing the fulfilment of the action plan of solutions; and

- the importance of effective communication flows across organisational boundaries.

1.25 We found a number of engagement activities and projects undertaken by councils that were specifically intended to have a beneficial impact on those participating in the engagement activity. Such activities encouraged individuals and communities to become involved, to increase their confidence and capability, and build on improving 'social capital'[24]. Such examples include:

a The support of flood wardens in Llanrwst in the Conwy Valley to help prepare communities who are under threat of flooding, and afterwards to support the recovery process.

b Communities who develop and implement their own alternative energy solutions, such as Angiddy Valley near Tintern in Monmouthshire, where residents are developing a local hydro-electric scheme.

c In Pembrokeshire, the FRAME community project recycles furnishings (funded by the Strategic Recycling Scheme) and has demonstrated a professional and business-like approach. It is run by skilled and enthusiastic volunteers with the ability to train and build the capacity of others to help sustain the project.

d In Ruthin, Denbighshire, the community helped decide how a sum of money should be spent to upgrade leisure facilities in Cae Ddol Park following the removal of an old paddling pool (see next case study).

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24   Defining social capital: 'Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense, social capital is closely related to what some have called 'civic virtue. The difference is that 'social capital' calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a 'sense' network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.' (Putnam 2000: 19).

Case study: Denbighshire County Council – Cae Ddol Community involvement

Cae Ddol is a popular park situated in Ruthin but the facilities were in need of replacement. In 2009, the Council was forced to demolish a popular paddling pool, due to reasons of health and safety and the cost of renovation.

This decision resulted in significant protest from many residents. The Council met residents to discuss the situation and exchange information and views in a frank and open atmosphere. This dialogue helped dispel much of the initial bad feeling and a better understanding was reached, including the offer of participatory budgeting The residents were given the opportunity to propose alternative schemes to replace the paddling pool. Following the offer of a grant of £25,000 to fund successful schemes, a working group of officers, councillors and community volunteers of all ages was formed. Residents submitted over 30 proposals for the park and the working group was given the task of costing, testing and evaluating each project. In early November 2009, a shortlist of schemes was presented to the community which voted to select the most popular. Working together not only improved play facilities, but made children and residents feel more involved with the decisions and therefore more empowered. Younger people really made an invaluable contribution to the overall success of the project.

Denbighshire County Council officers and councillors had 'developed a strong working relationship with the local community, each developing increased respect for and understanding of the other's responsibilities and capabilities'.[25]

The Ruthin community would like to repeat the process, if possible, with other funding streams.

1.26 Also in Denbighshire, but on a much larger scale, the 'Big Debate' survey not only consulted residents about the new 'Big Plan'[26], but also sought to secure ongoing involvement from communities. Through voluntary groups, the newly formed Area Member Groups[27] and improved web interaction, communities are being given the opportunity to become more informed, continue the debate and feed back views and ideas on an ongoing basis. This approach should enable communities to make a more productive and relevant contribution towards the development of the 'Big Plan'.

1.27 We came across fewer examples of longer-term collaboration and public 'partnership' which could offer communities ongoing opportunities to participate in ongoing decision making or problem solving. However, the Wrexham Housing Tenant and Leaseholder Participation Group, which has been in existence since 2004, allows tenant representatives to work closely with officers and councillors on a continual basis in order to improve services (see next case study).

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25   Quote from Denbighshire County Council's evaluation of the Cae Ddol community engagement initiative.

26   Denbighshire County Council's name for its Single Integrated Plan.

27   Area Member Groups are described in more detail in paragraph 1.28c

Case study: Wrexham County Borough Council – Working with tenants on a long-term basis

In 2004, tenants voted to retain Wrexham County Borough Council as their landlord. In response, the Council formed a comprehensive, long-term engagement strategy to support tenant and leaseholder participation.

The strategy aimed to offer tenants and leaseholders a range of opportunities to participate, either through groups or as individuals. These participation opportunities ranged from simply receiving information to becoming a full member of the Wrexham Tenant and Member Partnership. The strategy also aimed to encourage, support and enable tenants to participate and become involved in discussions over decisions affecting them and to continuously improve communication and share information with all tenants and leaseholders.

The creation of the Wrexham Tenant and Member Partnership was considered a key factor in the implementation of the strategy. It includes equal numbers of elected councillors and tenant representatives. Its role is: to monitor the Council's Landlord Services and any services delivered which directly affect tenants; to consider and make recommendations to the Council's Executive Board on policy and plans which impact on tenants; and to continue to promote and encourage the participation of tenants and leaseholders. Information and recommendations arising from Partnership meetings are communicated to tenants through newsletters and the Council's website.

Achievements have been mixed. The overall condition of the housing stock has deteriorated over the last five years due to lack of capital funding. However, the Partnership has managed to help improve housing services and this has been recognised and appreciated by tenants. In a survey in August 2010, they expressed their satisfaction on a number of areas such as: day-to-day repairs; the condition of their homes and efforts to improve the housing stock; the ongoing contact with Landlord Services; and the quality of tenant participation arrangements.

1.28 Discussions with a number of groups during our study have provided direct evidence of improved 'social capital'. We found several instances, see below, where groups are not only making an impact on service improvement but consider that they are also benefitting as a result.

   a Young people who were involved in 'youth forums' or participated in engagement events impressed us with their knowledge and grasp of current issues, their understanding of local government working and their desire for continued involvement to help design and improve services. This age group has also been especially targeted by the Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's *Love Where U Live* initiative and award scheme which encourages schoolchildren to care for, and about, the environment in their communities. There is strong evidence that the young people involved in this initiative are directly benefitting from the engagement, through increased confidence and public-speaking skills and becoming 'ambassadors' for their communities. Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's Youth Forum held strong views on proposals for modernising education provision in the area, which forum members eloquently articulated. The Youth Forum members were found to be highly motivated towards supporting change and improvement for their schools and communities.

b The neighbourhood management group is an emerging concept that encourages public engagement and empowers participants. A small number of councils are either beginning to establish such groups, or are considering their introduction. These groups are often built on established partnership and themes, such as Community Safety forums, but are to be given greater powers to address specific problems and challenges facing their community. The development of these groups is still work in progress and so their effectiveness cannot yet be fully evaluated.

c Another format for improving community engagement, which is under consideration or in development within some councils is the Area Forum or the Area Member Group, in which councillors from neighbouring wards are brought together to discuss local issues and concerns and to formulate joint actions to address local issues. These groups have the potential to bring the council more in touch with communities by providing a platform for regular and planned dialogue between councillors and the public. However, as with neighbourhood management groups, they are in their infancy in Wales, and are yet to be tried and tested.

1.29 Generally, however, we found that councils experience difficulty in clearly demonstrating that any increases in the confidence and capacity of people who participate are due to the efforts of the council. A number of councils are therefore seeking to develop measures and outcomes[28], which could go some way to demonstrating the positive impact of public engagement on the people taking part and their communities.

There are examples of good practice where services carry out engagement to reach the more vulnerable and 'seldom seen' members of the community

1.30 For those services which work with highly vulnerable people, effective engagement and relationship building are integral to providing highly sensitive care and to effectively supporting those service users who are in the greatest need. To offer a viable service, staff are required to build up relationships based on trust, confidence and credibility. Staff must also ensure that the engagement method used meets the needs and requirements of their service users, who are often experiencing major crises in their lives. Therefore, thorough knowledge of their service users' situation and needs is essential in order to design and implement the appropriate response.

1.31 There is recognition from a number of councils that effective engagement, especially if achieved through good partnership working, such as with the voluntary sector, could help close the gap between the least and most advantaged people in their areas. Such engagement could also help to improve social inclusion and develop a culture of shared values.

1.32 A number of community partnerships are working closely with councils and stakeholders to help shape the quality and delivery of services and make better use of resources. These partnerships are also contributing to the improvement of social conditions in their communities, such as for those afflicted by alcohol or drug-related anti-social behaviour. For example, in Monmouthshire, improved engagement work through a community safety partnership coincided with a decline in reported violent crime incidents in 2010.

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28   The evaluation of the effectiveness of public engagement activity is explored more fully in Section 3 of the report.

1.33 Vulnerable families in need have also benefited from being given greater opportunities to influence the quality and type of services they can expect from councils and partner agencies, as outlined in the case study below.

1.34 The greatest successes appear to be projects which have worked with and effectively engaged young people. The nature of the Children and Young People partnerships expects continual and active efforts by councils and their partners to engage with younger people. Nevertheless, there are a number of examples where initiatives have been notably successful, for example, in helping to reduce drug and alcohol-related crime among the young and working with them to help improve their life chances. This is also an area of engagement in which councils are beginning to be guided by external influences to help develop and promote effective engagement. For example, the Children and Young People Participation Consortium has developed seven standards of effective engagement, to help councils to develop an outcome-based approach when engaging with children and young people.

Case study: Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council and Interlink: The Child Poverty Pioneer initiative

In 2010, the Welsh Government announced their first 'Families First' Child Poverty Pioneer areas – one in north Wales and the other in south Wales, which was led by Rhondda Cynon Taf working with Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent councils.

The aim of the Child Poverty Pioneer areas was to establish good practice in improving the delivery of services to families, especially those living in poverty. Each Pioneer area was given the task of initiating and developing efficient and effective approaches to help support families out of poverty. These included:

- a common assessment process for every family with a key worker allocated to carry out the assessment; and

- an integrated family support pathway which meets the aims of Families First with the right balance of interventions.

In parallel to these approaches, all members of the families were consulted to find out what they thought and felt about what it was like for them to get help when things became difficult in their lives. Families were also consulted on how they felt about being assessed for that help. The Council and its partners wanted information on the effectiveness of current approaches and so some of the families were consulted as they were going through the assessment processes. It was clear that the assessment process was often difficult for families, especially when they had to repeat their story a number of times to different workers. The consultation also found that:

- constant assessments made things worse not easier;

- only when the whole family was supported did the situation improve; and

- having one constant key worker was of significant benefit to the client.

Quotes from families were also valued:

- 'You can't come into someone's life and change it in six weeks.' (Social Services client)

- 'One part of the system does not seem to realise the impact it has upon another, when dealing with the same family.' (Worker)

- 'There are loads of people when you go for a meeting and they don't talk to you, just about you.' (Young person on her Looked After Children review meeting)

- 'It's not just me that needs help, my mum does too.' (Young person)

The information received from this consultation process will inform the development of a Team Around the Family approach which will be piloted in specific areas of Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Section 2
Most councils have not yet fully embedded and mainstreamed public engagement into their organisational culture and partnership activities

Most councils have not yet fully embedded and mainstreamed public engagement into their organisational culture and partnership activities

2.1 In this section of the report we consider:

a the scale of commitment and understanding demonstrated by senior council officers and councillors towards public engagement;

b whether councils are developing a strategic approach to the planning and implementing of public engagement; and

c the impact of partnership working and collaboration in relation to public engagement.

Few councils have developed a robust, strategic and co-ordinated approach to public engagement to improve outcomes and achieve efficiencies

Exhibit 4: Why a public engagement strategy is important

A public engagement strategy can provide the basis of identifying desired outcomes and measures of success, help to plan and co-ordinate action, improve ownership and partnership working, allocate responsibilities, and identify who should be held to account. It also helps identify the correct method and means to engage, which can enable citizens to influence quality of service delivery and so benefit individuals and communities. Finally, it improves the quality of performance management and scrutiny to oversee, monitor and evaluate the delivery of public engagement.

Political and managerial leadership of public engagement is not yet fully developed

2.2 Public engagement can be a broad concept, subject to different interpretations and definitions. Therefore, within a council, strong leadership and focus are essential in order to develop and communicate clear ideas on what public engagement can achieve, to clarify its overall purpose, define desired outcomes and set high standards of delivery.

2.3 We found that the expressed commitment of senior officers and councillors is generally widespread, with the value of public engagement at least appreciated. The attitude of senior leaders is usually positive and 'generally receptive' towards improving the quality of their public engagement activities. Their other comments include a recognition that public engagement should 'not be a tick box exercise', realising it must be 'meaningful' for the public and 'worthwhile' for a council. Our interviewees within the councils see

public engagement as a positive force to enhance the quality and relevance of decision making by helping bring forward public views and needs. They recognise that this helps to prioritise, shape and improve services in order to ensure councils meet the needs of communities more effectively.

2.4 Some councils report that where public engagement has resulted in tangible outcomes followed by positive public reaction, councillors and managers are developing a better understanding of the role and impact of the public in the process of service change and improvements. Specialist officers who implement engagement activities have commented that, for councillors and managers, the service user 'has become more real to them'.

2.5 In some cases, chief executive officers and senior councillors are acting as 'champions' for engagement activity by adopting portfolios (see Paragraph 2.7) and personally participating in public consultation events, such as 'road-shows'. A number of interviewees noted that such actions helped to consolidate and demonstrate a council's commitment to engagement, promoting openness, transparency and a willingness to listen to both staff and the public.

2.6 A growing number of councils are beginning to provide public engagement training for councillors, recognising that the latter could play a more prominent role in public engagement and could help enhance their credibility and accountability. There are also a few examples of strong cross-party support for public engagement, encouraging councillors to take a more active role in public engagement so as to improve the quality of decision making. However, there are very few examples of integrated cross-departmental approaches to public engagement at senior officer level.

2.7 Some councils have also appointed senior councillors as portfolio leads for public engagement. Their role being to: set an example and encourage councillor participation in public engagement activity; articulate the benefits of successful public engagement; encourage cross-party involvement; and encourage the use of public engagement data to improve the quality of decision making. Most of the appointments are fairly recent, so it is too early to fully assess their impact.

Exhibit 5: Articulating a commitment to public engagement

One of the three principles agreed by the Torfaen Local Service Board in its community strategy is 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, leads to trust in the public services being provided.'[29]

2.8 The majority of councillors interviewed are generally supportive of the idea of engaging the public. They recognise that engagement could help to sustain and lend credibility to their role as community leaders. However, a number also express a level of uncertainty and lack of confidence as to how they could influence or help direct public engagement. We found a lack of clarity and level of uncertainty among councillors about what role they should play in public engagement and how it relates to their democratic mandates. Despite their traditional role as community spokespersons relaying views and information between the public and the council, they were not always included in current consultation strategies.

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29   The three principles agreed by the Torfaen Local Service Board in its community strategy are of citizenship, democracy and participation.

2.9 We also found that a number of councillors and some senior officers had mixed reactions towards public engagement and are clearly not totally convinced about its benefits. Some expressed fears that public engagement could circumvent or undermine fundamental local democratic structures and processes. Furthermore, some felt that achieving really effective engagement is difficult because the public are often disinterested or could develop high expectations which councils would find difficult to manage. Concerns are also expressed that councils could lose control of service delivery if communities are given responsibility and resources to provide local services.

Most councils do not yet have a strategic approach to public engagement

2.10 Approximately a third of councils are in the process of drafting or adopting a comprehensive 'public engagement' strategy, recognising that their approach needs to be better planned and more comprehensive. Some are considering or working towards including Local Service Board partner organisations[30] in a strategic approach as described in the next case study from Bridgend County Borough Council. This is a positive development, as earlier strategies have tended to focus on limited aspects of engagement such as consultation only, and have excluded joint working. Current strategic accounts recognise that effective public engagement can help develop good relations and mutual trust with residents and is essential for strengthening key strategies and priorities by more accurately identifying measures of success and outcomes. In some cases, senior officers are also being given direct responsibility for overseeing all public engagement related activity.

Case study: Bridgend County Borough Council – Developing a joint Local Service Board Public Engagement Strategy

On behalf of the Local Service Board, Bridgend County Borough Council has, in partnership with the police and health, led the development of a Citizen Engagement Strategy (the Strategy) which was approved in November 2010. The Strategy will not supersede existing citizen engagement arrangements within individual Local Service Board organisations, but will complement existing arrangements and provide a framework to deliver a co-ordinated and consistent approach to public engagement. The Strategy identifies clear and common aims and outcomes, and it will support, encourage and enable local communities to better engage with the agencies on the Local Service Board. It will also help ensure that these agencies engage with citizens and service users in a co-ordinated and joined-up manner. The Council has also led on establishing a Local Service Board Citizen Engagement Steering Group, comprising key partner organisations, to ensure that the Strategy is implemented successfully. One of its tasks is to develop an annual engagement programme to reduce the overall number of public service consultations and to share and co-ordinate consultations. A new website will enable and encourage citizens to engage with Local Service Board partners online.

The Local Service Board is keen to ensure that the Strategy delivers better engagement, and progress will be measured using the Community Strategy Outcome Measures of the percentage of people surveyed who feel they can and have influenced decisions, and the percentage of residents who have a strong sense of community. This is to be done in 2012 using the Council's Citizens Panel Survey.

The Local Service Board has facilitated in-house training, provided by the Consultation Institute which led to a Continuing Professional Development accreditation for approximately 35 local practitioners from Local Service Board partners. This helps to develop capacity and expertise to deliver effective public engagement.

Through these initiatives the Local Service Board is laying the foundations for effective and co-ordinated public engagement across the county borough. The Local Service Board anticipates that consultation and engagement will be more effective, costs will be reduced, 'consultation fatigue' will be avoided, and citizens will have a better experience of consultation and engagement.

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30   The issues of partnership working are discussed further on page 35.

2.11 However, most councils have not yet developed a rigorous strategic approach which plans and encompasses their public engagement activity and clearly demonstrates how it helps to shape, inform and advance key priorities and improvement objectives.

2.12 We found that the lack of strategic approach often resulted in the loss of a clear corporate direction and statement of intent, a misunderstanding about what public engagement and its constituent parts really mean. Consequently, we found examples of councils implementing public engagement on an ad hoc basis, suggesting they are unsure of the outcomes they are seeking from engagement activities. There is also a lack of clarity about how much overall resources and budget a council should invest in public engagement and what methodology to use such as when to inform, consult or work together. There are examples, for instance, where the public is consulted without prior information being provided which would have enabled them to make meaningful and considered choices.

Current corporate structures to undertake public engagement do not effectively co-ordinate or support the achievement of efficiencies

2.13 Without a strategic approach in place to provide clarity on what it is they want to achieve through public engagement, it is difficult for a council to effectively develop the next stage of planning and detailed co-ordination of engagement activity. A successfully co-ordinated approach is heavily dependent on a strong corporate message and influence to establish direction, purpose and accountability. A successful approach also requires close collaboration between services and engagement specialists to support implementation and evaluation.

2.14 Over half of councils are making progress to develop an improved co-ordinated and planned approach to public engagement, examples include:

a Bridgend County Borough Council is starting to develop a network among services and external partners to provide overview of public engagement throughout the area (see previous case study).

b Carmarthenshire County Council is developing an internal networking approach overseen by the Assistant Chief Executive and a joint working approach with Local Service Board partners to reduce duplication.

c Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council is refining a comprehensive toolkit to establish standards of practice and is recording instances of engagement activity.

d Caerphilly County Borough Council has established a 'portal' to record all engagement activity undertaken within the area and so avoid duplication.

e Powys County Council has recently established a similar portal and is now working to include partners' public engagement activities.

2.15 However, we found that many councils have not yet developed a comprehensive forward plan for public engagement activity. They do not yet have robust corporate processes or frameworks to ensure that all engagement is thoroughly planned and co-ordinated among services, taking advantage of potential efficiencies by sharing resources and avoiding duplication.

2.16 Consequently, public engagement activity often appears disconnected, with no corporate actions to draw public engagement initiatives together to share expertise, experience and information, or to ensure that correct procedures and appropriate tools are being used. Further, we did not find consistently applied processes in place which would provide robust estimates of overall budgetary costs. Neither did councils undertake regular risk or impact assessments to identify how they would deal with a controversial or sensitive topic. As a result, some councils encountered difficult scenarios and unexpected degrees of opposition.

2.17 A lack of planning often resulted in an inability to appreciate that a significant amount of time and resources must be invested to implement effective engagement activity. We found instances where resources had to be channelled from another service to shore up the need in a major engagement exercise, consequently using another service's budget and staff. Councils often lacked a complete picture of the capacity and resources available to them throughout the organisation, to undertake public engagement.

2.18 Approximately a third of the councils had developed corporate guidelines or tools and employed specialist officers to promote or support engagement activity. But a lack of planning had frequently led to insufficient promotion, co-ordination and monitoring of many good initiatives, such as the development 'toolkits' and 'activity calendars', designed to establish a standard framework of public engagement activity. Also, councils are often uncertain whether or how services used the 'tools' or adhered to corporate guidance or standards. They found it difficult to keep track of the amount and type of engagement being undertaken throughout their services. This lack of monitoring is often due to a shortage of resources to check on what public engagement activity is happening.

2.19 The lack of knowledge and information sharing or 'silo working' among services is still proving a barrier to developing a co-ordinated approach to public engagement. Services are often unaware of their role in the implementation of public engagement within a council, or how it applies to their service. Also, although some services are more expert in undertaking public engagement, there is often an inflexibility or inability to make it easy for staff to work across services in order to share this expertise and experience. In addition, service data collection systems are often exclusive and service specific, so services are unable to easily share data[31]. We did find several instances of well-delivered service-specific public engagement activity which could be used as 'templates', to help develop a council-wide plan and define how engagement will help shape services and establish a framework to monitor and evaluate progress.

2.20 Some councils have recognised these issues and are in the process of setting up or establishing cross-departmental public engagement working groups to develop a more 'co-ordinated and planned approach' among operational officers. Such co-ordination will enable services to identify opportunities to share capacity and expertise and to jointly organise events.

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31   Sharing of public engagement data will be discussed in greater detail in Section 3.

There are some examples of partnership working in public engagement but significant efficiencies have not yet been achieved

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Exhibit 6: Working in partnership can improve the quality of public engagement

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Public engagement undertaken jointly by partners enables them to share expertise, resources and knowledge and helps build mutual capacity. It encourages partners to begin to forward plan and develop an area-wide approach to public engagement, dovetailing engagement activities and avoiding duplication and potential consultation fatigue. Greater collaborative working is being encouraged by the Welsh Government in most services and among all public sector organisations, an approach which will benefit the implementation of public engagement activity.

Therefore, councils and their Local Service Board partners need to be committed to engaging with their service users and communities 'so that they can work together, guided by local priorities and a shared sense of what matters locally'.[32]

Increasingly, public engagement is being undertaken through partnership working within Local Service Boards, but the approach is not yet strategic

2.21 Many councils are demonstrating a greater willingness to build on established links with Local Service Board partners or through specific partnerships, such as Community Safety or Health and Wellbeing, in order to plan and implement joint public engagement activities.

2.22 Councils clearly recognise that it benefits all partners concerned to carry out joint engagement activity, as they can begin to co-ordinate their public engagement plans to help avoid duplication; share resources to achieve economies of scale, as well as pool expertise and knowledge. The public in turn can benefit from a more co-ordinated approach that avoids consulting them too much.

2.23 As well as the obvious benefits of joint working, councils also recognise that Local Service Board partners have specialist knowledge, experience and contacts which can help them build on already established relationships, to contact more vulnerable members of communities. This shared working and exchange of knowledge helps councils target and tailor engagement activity to suit the more 'seldom seen' or those at greater risk.

2.24 Current indications show that there are examples of established public engagement collaborations in the majority of councils. There are examples where partners have shared skills, resources and ideas to address specific community issues or to identify needs. The Fframwaith Partnership[33] initiatives encourage service users to work with councils and the voluntary sector to identify problems and jointly find solutions to help resolve the issues of both families and communities. Councils also work with partners on discrete 'task and finish' consultation projects, such as Health, Social Care and Wellbeing needs assessments.

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32   *Developing your comprehensive community engagement strategy*, IDeA 2009.

33   The Fframwaith Partnership has been set up to develop, implement and monitor the Children and Young People's Plan for Rhondda Cynon Taf, which is the key strategic statement setting out how the wellbeing of all children, young people and their families will be improved.

2.25 Although there are examples of efforts being made to develop a more strategic approach to public engagement developed by Local Service Boards (see next case study), at present, joint working on public engagement projects tends to be agreed on an ad hoc basis, and rarely forms part of a broader strategic area arrangement.

2.26 We found that there is frequently a lack of clarity about what Local Service Boards are seeking to achieve collectively from public engagement. There is also a lack of clarity over what roles and responsibilities each of the Local Service Board members should play and how they can improve the accountability of the Board and its partners.

2.27 A number of Local Service Boards are now beginning to formalise current partnership practices into coherent strategies which clearly articulate partners' aims for undertaking public engagement throughout the county area. They are seeking to ensure that each of the partners helps to demonstrate a shared commitment and willingness to enhance public engagement activity. Some of the partnerships are beginning to give a clear message and demonstrate leadership to ensure public engagement is prioritised, and there is a shared understanding of what constitutes a citizen-centred service.

2.28 The new legislation from the Welsh Government concerning the development of Single Delivery Plans, which calls on Local Service Boards to integrate local service planning, should strongly impact on the public engagement agenda of Local Service Boards:

'Insufficient use has been made of the voice of citizens and communities as a force for improvement. In designing their information and engagement strategies, and undertaking results-based accountability, Local Service Boards should focus with purpose on strengthening the citizen voice in ways which go beyond consultation to high intensity, high impact engagement around the top issues and priorities.'[34]

2.29 The Welsh Government intends that public service reform should be 'premised on citizen voice as a driver for service improvement. A single integrated plan should set out how partners intend to engage with people and communities with a very clear focus on how this will best support service improvement and improve the experience of people using the services.'[35]

2.30 There is a very clear indication therefore that in future public engagement should be approached through partnership and greater collaborative working. This development should impact significantly on Local Service Boards and their public engagement strategies, making a desirable development into an essential one.

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34   Quote from the consultation document on the Single Delivery Plan from the Welsh Government *Shared purpose-shared delivery,* 10 January 2012.

35   Quote from the consultation document on the Single Delivery Plan from the Welsh Government *Shared purpose-shared delivery,* 10 January 2012.

Case study: City and County of Cardiff and Local Service Board – Joint consultation across all service providers

This is the first time that a joint Strategic Needs Assessment and partnership approach to consultation and engagement has been undertaken to inform strategy and policy across all public sector service providers. This was done through the development of an Integrated Partnership Strategy called *What Matters*. To reduce duplication of effort and resources within and across statutory partnerships in Cardiff, a single Joint Needs Assessment with a single programme of consultation and engagement was developed among the partners. The results of the joint working helped improve access and sharing of data and analysis between the partners including the Council, Police, Health and Voluntary Sector. Consequently, for the first time in Cardiff, this has allowed for the development of a fully evidence-based integrated partnership strategy – *What Matters* – which has replaced the previous individual statutory plans.

It is intended that its success will be measured using an evidence-based results based accountability approach to test whether the strategic priorities are really making a positive difference to the communities of Cardiff. The needs assessment consisted of the following phases:

- establishment of a partnership Business Intelligence Team;
- audit of data from existing needs assessments;
- identification of existing partnership data resources;
- identification of new and proxy data resources;
- completion of a top-level Needs Assessment;
- identification of measurable outcomes through results based accountability;
- development of a data-development agenda where data is not available; and
- preparation of Neighbourhood Intelligence Reports to inform partnership working at a local level.

Most regional and collaborative arrangements for public engagement are at too early a stage to demonstrate efficiencies

2.31 As well as examples of joint working between Local Service Board partners, there are examples of improved, combined working among neighbouring councils in order to organise or undertake public engagement activities. The growing pressure of financial cutbacks and the increase in the number of shared services between councils, as outlined by the recent 'Simpson' Report,[36] has been highlighted by some interviewees as an opportunity to develop a more collaborative approach between councils to organise public engagement.

2.32 During the Study, we found a few instances of increasing joint working where a small number of councils are seeking to extend resources and achieve greater efficiencies by various collaborative arrangements:

a Inter-council working: Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf Councils are working together on a joint consultation and engagement project using European Social Funding. The project will help to co-ordinate public engagement activity between the Councils and their Local Service Boards, forming the basis of a joint strategic approach, which is appropriate for the two areas as they share many common needs and issues. Denbighshire and Conwy Councils carried out joint consultation on community safety, health and well being, licensing and planning services.

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36   The Simpson Report is the popular reference name for the following document: *A Report to Carl Sargeant AM, Minister for Social Justice and Local Government on Local, Regional, National: What services are best delivered where?*, CAB (10-11) 66 simpson report. Published 2011.

b Town and community councils: their role in public engagement activity is underdeveloped in most areas. Yet some councils have recognised that they could be a valuable resource to help reach into communities, and are building on established relations to help increase and improve public engagement. For example, Monmouthshire County Council, in line with its Public Engagement Strategy, has agreed a protocol with its community councils for the implementation of engagement activity.

c Third or voluntary sector: There are examples where specific engagement activity is organised in collaboration between councils and the voluntary sector. However, they tend to be on an operational and responsive basis rather than part of a strategic approach, for example, assessing health needs in conjunction with health and wellbeing needs assessments.

2.33 In 2007, Cardiff, Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent Councils accepted the invitation to participate in the Enhanced Consultation Strategy project, funded mainly by the Welsh Government's 'Making the Connections' Improvement Fund until March 2009. Its aim was to design a framework that would help improve and co-ordinate the consultation and engagement methods used in these areas, and to design resources and tools that would help that process for others. The tools and outcomes of the project have been adopted and further developed by Participation Cymru[37] and form part of the public engagement guidance on the 'Ask Cardiff' website. However, although producing some positive outcomes, the legacy of the project does not include ongoing collaboration between the three councils to undertake public engagement

work on a significant scale, or providing a robust template on how further collaboration or integration of public engagement work between councils could be achieved. This is mainly due to the extensive and unsustainable resources required to complete the project.

2.34 In conclusion, we found that, in many cases, the stated commitment to public engagement had not yet been supported by structures and actions. For example, approximately a third of councils are working towards creating strategies or developing a more structured approach and a supportive council-wide culture. In contrast, a minority of councils are still only taking initial steps towards establishing public engagement as a regular activity and have not yet developed a planned and resourced approach.

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37   Participation Cymru is an organisation funded by the Welsh Government to develop and encourage public participation by public-sector bodies.
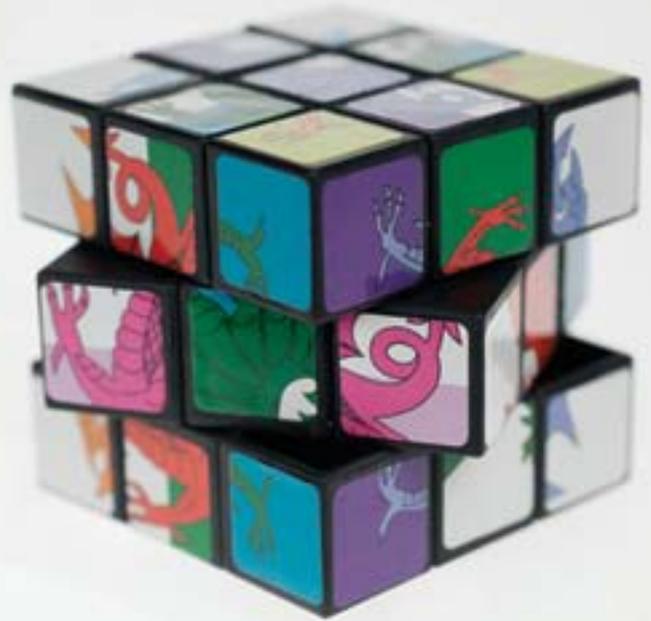
Section 3
Councils rarely provide feedback on what difference public engagement has made, and monitoring and evaluation are weak

Councils rarely provide feedback on what difference public engagement has made and monitoring and evaluation are weak

3.1 In this section of the report we consider whether:

a councils are effectively managing and using the data they collect through public engagement;

b they robustly monitor and evaluate their engagement activities and processes to see if their objectives are being met; and

c there is any evidence that public engagement activities are achieving positive impacts and outcomes and that this is being effectively fed back to the public.

Councils do not do enough to gather together and review data about their public engagement activity and there are weaknesses in the performance management and scrutiny of such activity

Exhibit 7: Why it is important to monitor and evaluate public engagement activity

Councils need to recognise that the public is a prime source of information on the effectiveness of services and help to gauge what aspect of a council's operations is important. Before undertaking any public engagement activity, councils should clearly set out why they have chosen to engage the public, what information is required from them and what goals or outcomes they wish to achieve. Councils need to be able to compile a complete set of data arising from all of their engagement activity to help them assess the usefulness and impact of their engagement activity. Without comprehensive and accurate data, it is difficult for councils to plan ahead, decide whether public engagement is really necessary and select the most appropriate method of engagement to achieve the best possible outcomes.

During and after the implementation of engagement activity, robust corporate monitoring is essential to demonstrate whether the engagement is a success: that the right methods of engagement are used, the relevant information and data are obtained, and that the public response is both effective and productive. Effective monitoring should also help councils develop a more successful approach to future public engagement activities.

Most local councils do not robustly collate, analyse and use the data accumulated through public engagement activity

3.2   Nearly all councils can demonstrate that they gather information and data arising from specific public engagement activity, either from individual service-led engagement projects or from corporate engagement activities, such as residents' surveys or citizens' panels. This data is usually reported to senior management teams and executive boards or cabinets.

3.3   A number of councils also have 'corporate' databases which contain public engagement information. These vary in nature and remit; some databases are constructed solely for corporate-initiated engagement activity such as residents' surveys or citizens' panels, but exclude specific service-led engagement. Other databases are more like 'calendars', primarily holding information about the timings and nature of the engagement activities undertaken by the council. Some also include Local Service Board partner engagement events.

3.4   However, the majority of councils acknowledge that they do not have robust and adequate corporate frameworks and processes for collecting and evaluating all public engagement activity information. Neither do they develop and issue corporate guidelines on how to monitor and evaluate data. Consequently, councils are not totally aware of the type, quantity and profile of public engagement information they hold – especially within their services.

3.5   There are examples where more comprehensive data collection systems are in the process of being developed by councils, but these are rare. An example is Torfaen County Borough Council which is developing a more comprehensive, joint consultation database, with a diary to track activity. The councils that have such systems also anticipate including partner engagement data and eventually being able to compare data with other local or national data.

3.6   Many council services, which regularly undertake public engagement activity, have developed their own autonomous 'systems' to collect and analyse data. To some degree this has arisen from the need for local government to respond and provide data to suit the differing requirements of Government departments, for example, as part of grant applications or the monitoring of national performance. However, we found that such valuable information often stayed within a council department, rather than being collated and analysed by and for the whole council. Examples of such autonomous systems include social care, where engagement is an important element of service delivery. Similarly within planning departments, where public consultation is a statutory process for the development of local development plans. Also, some services are required to organise and collect consultation data to comply as part of a funding agreement or grant. For example, Conwy Environment Services effectively collated and analysed data for the Colwyn Bay Waterfront project.

3.7   However, although we frequently found a willingness among services to share their public engagement data, the use of incompatible systems to store and analyse data limits the ability of other services and partner organisations to access and use the information. Without a central source of data, councils are missing opportunities to access, interpret, check and use a complete set of public engagement data. Further, they are often unable to compare and benchmark both internally and externally.

3.8 In addition to the lack of central data collection, councils rarely have the resources and capacity to fully and comprehensively analyse and evaluate their public engagement information. Councils find it difficult to demonstrate the links between public engagement data and how they are used to make changes, for example, to improve services or change policy. Data is not sufficiently 'interpreted' and published in a format to clearly show the public what have been the impacts of their suggestions and opinions. Consequently, many councils find it difficult to clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of public engagement activity and whether decisions made took the results of the engagement into consideration and what outcomes are achieved as a result.

Many councils struggle to demonstrate benefits from their public engagement because they do not have robust mechanisms to develop measures and outcomes or review their processes

3.9 At present, the majority of local councils do not clearly demonstrate or communicate the effectiveness and outcomes of their public engagement processes.

3.10 Councils are finding it difficult to show success mainly due to the lack of measurable outcomes arising from the engagement activities. Neither do the majority of councils carry out regular and formal evaluations of how well the engagement activity is organised. Therefore, they find it difficult to clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of any engagement activity and if, and what, improvements would be needed to future public engagement performance.

3.11 Current performance measures for public engagement tend to reflect basic information such as the numbers or percentage of people who have participated or responded. Our fieldwork identified very few examples where councils have developed more qualitative performance and outcome measures. However, councils which are focusing on improving their ability to measure success in public engagement are beginning to strengthen their focus on developing tangible and realistic outcomes for public engagement which can be more readily appreciated by the public and participants, and help to demonstrate progress.

3.12 We also found that corporate or specialist performance management staff are rarely involved to help guide, monitor or evaluate engagement activity. They seldom facilitate in the identification and development of outcomes and performance measures to assess the effectiveness of engagement performance and to ensure that both engagement activity and results link into key improvement objectives. Neither do they help assess whether a public engagement activity adhered to any corporate standards of practice and performance.

3.13 However, there are examples where councils are beginning to recognise the need to include formal performance monitoring and evaluation arrangements to track major corporate consultation projects to see how well the processes worked and how they impacted on the quality of the results. For example, Denbighshire County Council monitored the public's reaction and responses to its 'Big Debate'[38], using the feedback to help improve future public engagement activity.

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38   The Big Debate was a major consultation project from late 2011 until January 2012, which invited Denbighshire residents to provide ideas and comments on where council spending should be reduced or directed, to ensure that residents get the services they want.

3.14 Councils also reported that it is sometimes easier to develop performance measures and outcomes if the engagement project is more focused and its purpose is relatively clear. For example, Conwy County Borough Council's Environment Services encouraged better engagement with communities threatened with flooding, during several flood-defence engineering projects. This led to beneficial changes being made to services in response to closer collaboration with the public. The Council hoped that this example would convince all of its managers of the benefits of public engagement and would help to demonstrate how the customer can be at the centre of service design and delivery.

3.15 We also found that some councils are planning to implement a comprehensive corporate process to help analyse the type and quality of their public engagement activity to assess its performance and impact. For example, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council is introducing a feedback form which asks services about the purpose, desired outcomes, costs, and resources to be used, and how they will evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of their engagement activities.

The lack of central data collection and analysis of public engagement activity could adversely impact on the quality of performance management, reporting and scrutiny of public engagement activities

3.16 We found that the majority of councils frequently report on the results of public engagement activities. Reporting usually occurs following major consultation and engagement activities to cabinets, full council and, on some occasions, to senior management teams and scrutiny committees. Some produce an annual report on all engagement activity carried out during the year, which they consider demonstrates their commitment to using public engagement information as part of the decision making process. However, the results reported frequently tend to be raw data with little further analysis or consideration undertaken of the underlying causes and the meaning of the results.

3.17 Weaknesses in the analysis of data and evaluation of technique can adversely impact on the ability of councils to closely assess and scrutinise the quality and impact of their public engagement activity.

3.18 Although examples of some reports provided information about the results and outcomes of public engagement, the type of information provided in the majority of reports tends to focus on descriptions of methods of engagement used and the number of participants. Whilst there are some exceptions, we rarely found examples of any in-depth evaluation of data that directly showed whether the intended outcomes of the engagement have been achieved. Consequently, councils could not assess whether or how consultation or engagement activity had achieved intended outcomes or what contribution they have made towards, for instance, service improvement.

3.19 Similarly, councils do not collect sufficient information to be in a position to assess value for money regarding public engagement activities which are subject to the same financial pressures as other council services or activities. At present, very few councils record or consider the true cost of public engagement in terms of budget and resources. Some councils can identify and do manage corporate engagement costs, but few could quantify how much money and resources were used across services. This is also true of formal cost calculation which could lead to expressions of cost/benefit analysis, which could help raise awareness and understanding of a rationale for service charge and costs. Difficulties can arise in placing a value on output and outcomes, unless these are clearly stated at the outset.

Exhibit 8: Estimating the cost of public engagement

'Some suggest that because participatory products are 'intangible' they are beyond economic analysis. The reality is, however, that delivering participation processes costs money, and the amount allocated affects what is delivered and whether or not it works. Participation is competing for funds within institutional budget setting processes with many other worthwhile activities. Members of the public participation field (practitioners and academics) have long suggested that the resources allocated to public participation are inadequate, but at present there is no clear picture of what adequate resources actually are.'[39]

3.20 Even when more information and analysis are available, we find few councils organising regular and systematic reviews by scrutiny committees to check on the usefulness and viability of the engagement process used. Also, few councils look at how performance measures or proposed outcomes are initially identified and how they relate to improvement objectives or key strategies. At present, scrutiny committees rarely take the opportunity to look in more depth at the type and quality of information resulting from the engagement activity. Nor do scrutiny committees often consider whether the council's efforts to engage are having the desired impact on outcomes such as improving services.

3.21 However, on a more positive note, there are a few examples of the beginnings of a more organised approach. The Scrutiny Forum in Denbighshire County Council not only looked at the effectiveness of the engagement methods used in the Council's *Big Plan* consultation but will continue to monitor how ongoing public engagement will influence the implementation of the 'Big Plan' itself. As part of the development of neighbourhood management groups, the Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee is undertaking a review of the community engagement activities of the Safer Neath Port Talbot Partnership looking into the quality and impact of public engagement, and why some community groups work well, whereas others founder.

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39   Comment from *Making the case for public engagement: How to demonstrate the value of consumer input* by Edward Andersson, Emily Fennell and Thea Shahrokh.

Feedback following public engagement is not provided consistently to participants, who are rarely given the opportunity to say how the engagement activity could have been improved

Exhibit 9: Why it is important to provide feedback after public engagement activity

It is essential that the public are kept informed at all stages of consultation and engagement, especially regarding the results and outcomes. If participants do not receive this feedback, they could feel disenchanted, even mistrustful, and are unlikely to participate in future engagement opportunities. *The National Principles of Public Engagement in Wales*[40] recommend that: 'People are told the impact of their contribution. Timely feedback is given to all participants about the views they expressed and the decisions or actions taken as a result; methods and form of feedback should take account of participants' preferences.'

Participants rarely find out what difference public engagement has made and what contribution they have made to shape what councils do

3.22 A major problem we encountered, even among the better performing councils, is a lack of a structured approach to feeding back results of consultation and engagement to the public, especially to those who participated in the engagement. As outlined in the previous section, the majority of local councils do not clearly identify the outcomes arising from public engagement. Therefore, the public are frequently unaware and cannot appreciate what outcomes they are likely to expect in terms of changes or service improvements.

3.23 There are significant inconsistencies of standards of feedback both among and within councils. Many councils are not providing or communicating well-written, focused feedback to the public, especially participants, to demonstrate the impact of the engagement activity and to show that that the council has listened to, considered, and acted upon public opinion.

3.24 Some councils do not provide any appropriate feedback, whereas others made good efforts but often lack real impact by not spelling out actual outcomes and improvements. In some cases, results are published some time after the initial consultation. This is especially true of smaller, non-statutory consultations, whereas major corporate consultations are promoted in local papers, community newsletters or websites. The most common issues regarding feedback are as follows:

a There are frequently no agreed corporate standards or planning frameworks within councils on how feedback should be made, by whom, when, and what it should be like. Feedback is often not considered as a priority when consultation events are being planned, or even after completion, when it is frequently issued some time after the engagement event.

b No one person or team takes responsibility for issuing feedback. The corporate communications officers have the skills to create well-written feedback, but they often lacked direct links with consultation officers or services in order to organise a planned approach to feedback. Communications officers also may not have sufficient resources to provide such a service. Consequently the quality and type of feedback vary a great deal between and

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40   *National Public Engagement Principles in Wales*, launched by Participation Cymru, June 2011 (see Appendix 3 for details).

within councils as there is frequently no overall editorial control or overview of the amount and type of feedback provided.

c   Little research has been undertaken by councils to identify what feedback information the public want to know and how they wish to receive it. For example, would people prefer websites, postal responses, newspapers or new technology? Formal reports to the council are frequently considered as adequate feedback as they are in the public domain, despite often being written in formal, jargon-laden language. Also, if included on a website, feedback is often difficult to find, or is poorly promoted and signposted.

d   Meaningful feedback depends on good analysis of data. As discussed earlier in the report, a number of councils do not have the expertise to analyse all incoming data to provide an overview and in-depth analysis. This lack of analysis makes it difficult to translate that data into actual agreed actions, what outcomes will be achieved and changes made.

e   The majority of councils could not yet demonstrate a clear process showing how public input is fed into and used in the decision making process. This would help the public understand what happens to their input and how they can influence decisions. A clearly set out process can also explain why and how suggestions are taken forward or not, and how the public influenced the final outcomes.

The public themselves are rarely given the chance to comment on the effectiveness of the engagement processes used by councils

3.25   We found that councils rarely seek to comprehensively find out how, when and why people would want to be consulted or engaged. Members of the public are rarely offered opportunities to comment on whether current public engagement methods are welcome, interesting and worthwhile; or to suggest alternative ideas on how the provision of information, engagement events and projects can be improved.

3.26   Most councils do not clearly set out to participants what role they expect members of the public to play during engagement events. Such as, for example: to read or listen and learn; to provide views to help develop or adapt an agreed and established project; to help choose a project or outcome from a pre-selected list, having being given information on the advantages and disadvantages; or to enter into dialogue and debate on a significant service change, which requires a degree of knowledge and information. An indication of what role the councils expect the public to undertake would help to manage the expectations of the participants and help councils to select appropriate methods and tools of engagement.

3.27   The public rarely have access to performance information or reported evaluation and are therefore not able to inform themselves on a council's self-assessment of public engagement activity. Neither are the public regularly offered the means to feed back their impressions on how well they felt engagement events were organised.

3.28 As the public do not yet play a significant role in the scrutiny process, they are unable to join in with scrutiny committees to review the engagement processes. However, a small number of councils are considering how they can adapt their governance arrangements to allow the development of a greater role for the public in scrutiny and overview functions. Also, to test how well they communicate and involve the public, some councils are considering the formation of a 'Reading Group'[41] approach, to take advantage of the experience or expert advice which individual citizens could offer, and to help build up mutual trust and confidence.

41   A group consisting of members of the public who read and offer views on the quality and content of written material drafted by a council.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Audit Methods

Literature review

We have reviewed a wide range of documents including:

- Welsh Government policy, strategy, research and guidance documents relevant to public engagement;

- current academic research and guidance from many other sources including Participation Cymru, IDeA, Involve, Consumer Focus, the Scottish Government, Cabinet Office, Wales Centre for Health and Cardiff Business School;

- good practice examples from the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States of America; and

- public engagement literature and documents from local councils.

Our review of the literature addressed the following themes:

- clarification of the various interpretations and definitions of the terms relating to public engagement;

- the technical and practical aspects of designing and implementing public engagement activities, including scoping and developing a strategic approach, performance management, monitoring and evaluation and efficient use of resources;

- the key issues surrounding the compatibility and co-production between Participative Democracy and Representative Democracy;

- the impact of regional working and greater collaboration on the design and implementation of public engagement;

- the clarification and impact of the roles of the key 'players' within public engagement, namely, the council (staff, management and councillors), Local Service Boards and other partners, and the public; and

- the design and implementation of public engagement within each of the 22 local councils in Wales.

Data and Statistics

Due to the nature and current application of public engagement in Wales, there are minimal data and statistics available. However, we collated some numerical data on the proliferation of public engagement strategic documents, guidance and resources.

Interviews and fieldwork

During the early stages in January and February 2011, we met the Welsh Government, Participation Cymru, Cardiff Business School, and the Welsh Local Government Association to help shape the scope of the study and to explore our key lines of enquiry. A pilot study was undertaken with the co-operation of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, to whom we owe our thanks. During the site work from March to August 2011, we conducted interviews and document reviews with the remaining 21 councils, including key staff and councillors with responsibility or interest in public engagement. Meetings were also held with major partners, including the Local Service Boards and voluntary sector.

Visits to public engagement events

We attended several events which promoted and offered training in public engagement methodology. These included:

- Annual Participation Cymru Residential Network 2011 in partnership with the Welsh Government.
- Putting the Public Engagement Principles into Practice workshop facilitated by Participation Cymru.
- PSMW Summer School workshop for public engagement and National Principles.
- Accredited Public Engagement training days for all practitioners.
- Network event for Public Engagement for engagement practitioners.

Our Study Reference Group

We assembled a virtual Study Reference Group as an expert panel to use as a 'sounding board' to test our findings and emerging recommendations. The Group comprised public engagement trainers and practitioners, private and voluntary sector advisers, senior Welsh Government policy and research officers, an academic researcher, chief officers relating to social and consumer research. They represented the following organisations:

- Participation Cymru – Amanda Williams, Operations Manager.
- Welsh Language Board – Gwenith Price, Director of Language Schemes.
- Consumer Focus – Vivienne Sugar, Chair.
- Welsh Government Local Government Team – Making the Connections Policy and Performance Division, Department of Public Service Improvement, Welsh Assembly Government – Steve Pomeroy, Head of Local Government Strategy and Performance, and Richard Shearer.
- Interact Networks – Lindsey Colebourne.
- Welsh Local Government Association – Daniel Hurford, Interim Head of Policy, and Clover Rodrigues Policy Officer (Improvement and Governance).
- Cardiff Business School – Dr Tom Entwhistle, Senior Lecturer in Public Policy and Management.
- Save the Children – Emyr Williams, Participation Unit Manager.

Appendix 2 – Case Studies references, including those not used in the report

We would like to thank the following councils for submitting case studies. Although we were not able to include them all in the report, we will be making them available on the Good Practice Exchange and would like to encourage other councils to add to the growing library of examples, good ideas and case studies. We will also be including other good practice examples from across the United Kingdom.

Council	Theme or Title	Description
Wrexham	Tenants and leaseholder panel	Commitment to engage over a long period of time. Comprehensive long-term strategy to engage with tenants and leaseholders, resulted in residents working with Members through the Wrexham Tenant and Member partnership.
Rhondda Cynon Taf	Love Where You Live	Effective longer-term engagement with young people and communities to promote green issues based on events, school projects and interaction, special projects to address specific issues eg, pollution, litter.
Rhondda Cynon Taf	Viewpoint	Consulting young people on a large scale – using social media and e-comms.
Rhondda Cynon Taf	Fframwaith – Families First	Involving families in forming and making decisions on service design and delivery which impact directly on families. Consultation centred on the current experiences of children, young people and families who require intensive support, identifying key areas of concern, leading to informed recommendations for improvement – close involvement with families to discuss and agree solutions to their social and family problems.
Neath Port Talbot	Systems review	Business re-engineering which directly involves contribution by service users to improve services consulting and empowering – giving service users opportunity to influence service design from which they will benefit as improved quality of service.
Blaenau Gwent	Young people not in education, employment or training (NEETS).	Stakeholders and young people able to influence council policy – through engaging opportunities such as NEETS summit involving large number of affected young people, and offering them an opportunity to meet with service providers and key stakeholders to discuss current policy, service design and delivery. Informing and empowering disadvantaged young people to influence service provision.
Blaenau Gwent	Your voice: your choice	Comprehensive engagement – based on Community Safety Partnership; empowering the public – through involvement in discussion, negotiation and agreement of projects which should address community safety problems initially identified by residents. Encouraging them to identify local concerns and developing projects to address the problem areas. Funding was made available to implement 17 agreed projects.

Council	Theme or Title	Description
Blaenau Gwent	Access for All forum	The Forum has been instrumental in raising awareness of disabilities and the issues facing individuals with disabilities when accessing local services. The initiative received an Excellence Wales Award.
Blaenau Gwent	50+ Forum	The work and involvement of the 50+ forum helped identify the need for easier access to Council information and the availability of information for older people.
Caerphilly	Engagement of children and young people	Provides an opportunity for children and young persons to directly influence the Council's governance, planning and decision making process and reflect children and young persons' needs in service delivery. Consulting, involving and empowering.
Caerphilly	Weather warning webpage information	Use of new technology to inform families in times of crisis – information available to families who have internet access. Updated by teachers and school staff on a real time basis and can be used and accessed from home and mobile computer technology.
Caerphilly	Public Consultation and Engagement website portal	Using new technology to collect, store and share public engagement activity information among partners and the public. Provides a good base to maintain and record engagement. The plan is to further develop the portal for partners to use and share and provide more effective feedback from engagement activity. There is no reason why a standard engagement portal could not be shared amongst the public sector in Wales to provide a more joined-up approach to engagement.
Anglesey	Council budget setting road shows	Anglesey was facing very negative media attention and its Cabinet was in turmoil with no agreed agenda to take forward general public engagement. The initiative was new to the Council and helped create better relations with the public as well as including community views on the budget setting process.
Carmarthenshire	Carmarthenshire Community Challenge	Consultation Ferryside – county-wide community challenge to reduce carbon footprint. The Council is seeking to reduce its own carbon footprint, and is also encouraging residents to do the same through engaging with communities to support local carbon reduction projects and initiatives. Consulting and acting together on an important environmental issue.
Cardiff	Ask Cardiff – *What Matters* Ask Cardiff – Joint needs assessment	First time a joint strategic needs assessment and partnership approach to consultation and engagement has been undertaken to inform strategy and policy across all public sector service providers through the development of an integrated Partnership Strategy called What Matters. Partnership approach and data sharing – on statutory consultation.

Council	Theme or Title	Description
Cardiff	Council Meetings webcast	Use of new technology to promote and inform the public on council proceedings. The Council's decision to webcast council meetings has enabled Cardiff residents and any other interested parties to view meetings online, with the objective of making council proceedings accessible and transparent to a wider audience and providing an accurate record of each meeting. The first council in Wales to regularly broadcast council meetings on its website.
Bridgend	Working in partnership to develop and promote a consistent approach to community engagement	Partners working together to achieve shared outcomes from community engagement. On behalf of the LSB the Council has drafted a Local Service Board Community Engagement Strategy. This has been adopted by all partners and where necessary adapted to accommodate any specific requirements of each partner's organisation.
Bridgend	Promoting social inclusion by working closely with the voluntary sector on community engagement activities	Partners working together to reach and involve wider communities. By working closely with Bridgend Association with Voluntary Organisations the Council engages with a wide variety of community and user groups. The Cabinet Member plays a prominent role in engaging with the voluntary sector. Using existing networks set up within the voluntary sector to access a more diverse range of service users.
Bridgend	Developing capacity to engage with young people of all ages	The Council is demonstrating that age is no barrier to engagement and empowering young people to carry out engagement activity themselves. The Children and Young People's Partnership is training young people to engage with other young people. This technique is obtaining good quality qualitative evidence from young people of all ages including pre-school.
Conwy	Colwyn Bay Coastal defence and seafront	Partners consulting the public to change project delivery to match the public's requirements. Public involvement helped transform new sea defences from purely protection to also be used as a promenade and innovative water sports centre, resulting in combining an important engineering function with a catalyst for regeneration of the town. Innovative, well-marketed and presented, which encouraged participation.
Denbighshire	Participatory budgeting at Cae Ddol park, Ruthin	Empowering and involving a community in decision making, which resulted in a new play facility at the park for children, and residents feeling empowered and involved with making a decision. The Council engaged directly with the public to discuss the closure of leisure facilities, which met with significant public opposition. Engagement led to discussion on reasons for opposition, residents offered budget £24,000 to spend on alternative facilities – leading to eventual acceptance and ownership by residents. New facilities changed the perceptions of the public, and engagement with all proposers at all stages of the technical review led to full and effective public engagement; lessening the potential for criticism or resentment.

Council	Theme or Title	Description
Denbighshire	Big Debate	Public consultation of the Council's proposed programme of efficiencies over the next four years – to help prioritise key objectives identified by the public as needed and which services could be provided by others. The project was planned in detail, and utilised the power of web-based consultation, including more traditional methods such as written responses. The Council considered a wide range of issues, including the procurement of goods, use of buildings, reducing duplication, sharing resources, looking at alternative means of funding, looking at what services are essential. Not unique in Wales, but is an example of a pragmatic and open process as it allowed respondents to provide additional feedback as well as preferences on where efficiency savings should be made. It also included where partnership working could be better targeted. The process can cover a large sample at relatively low cost per head.
Denbighshire	Area Members Group concept	Area Member Groups (AMGs) are a revised structure of a previous geographically based model which contain members, officers and representatives from communities. The idea behind the concept is good and is an alternative way to provide ongoing engagement without costly administration and marketing.

Informing, consulting, involving and empowering. |
| Denbighshire | Ceri's family – award winning | Informing and consulting service users on complex and sensitive issues which directly impact on them. Ceri's Family is a web-based virtual media family with members ranging in age from two years to 81 years of age. Purpose was to bring real-life issues to life, particularly for those groups identified as hard to reach and socially exclusive. The initiative addresses a wide range of social care and age groups and provides an easy-to-use guide to help families and individuals. |
| Powys | Public Consultation and Engagement website portal | The website portal provides a good base to maintain and record engagement. The plan is to further develop the portal for partners to use and share and provide more effective feedback from engagement activity. |

Appendix 3 – List of useful contacts, research documents and website references including National Principles of Public Engagement in Wales

Some useful websites and documents

Please note these links are only operable on the electronic version of this report. These documents are only samples of what information is available – this list is not exhaustive and you will find many more engagement linked websites and documents during your research.

www.participationcymru.org.uk/

- National principles for public engagement in Wales
- Practitioners' manual for public engagement
- Other Participation Cymru resources
- Public Engagement Planning Group (which consists of representatives from Participation Cymru, Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association, NHLIAH, NHS Confederation and the Wales Audit Office). Meetings are co-ordinated by Participation Cymru and members. For further information, contact Helen Keatley on 02920 320500

www.participationworkerswales.org.uk
www.participationworkerswales.org.uk/standards/

- National Children and Young People's Participation Standards for Wales

www.tpas.org.uk/

- Participation: The Next Generation

www.involve.org.uk

- Deliberative public engagement: nine principles
- Participation Nation – Reconnecting Citizens to the Public Realm INVOLVE 2007
- Benefits of investing in community empowerment
- Making the case for public engagement: How to demonstrate the value of consumer input
- Involve @what the public say PE in national decision making July 2010
- Participation Nation – Reconnecting Citizens to the Public Realm INVOLVE 2007
- Developing your comprehensive community engagement strategy
- What the public say: Public engagement in national decision-making
- People and Participation: How to put the citizen at the heart of decision making

www.idea.gov.uk (LG Improvement and Development)
www.goodpracticewales.com
www.goodpracticewales.com/Resources/Citizen-Engagement
www.funkydragon.org

- Breathing fire into participation

www.uncrcletsgetitright.co.uk

- Children's Rights – Spice 'em up
- Participation – Young spice
- www.uncrcletsgetitright.co.uk/resourceslanding.aspx

www.pupilvoicewales.org.uk

- www.pupilvoicewales.org.uk/english/home/resources/

wales.gov.uk/

- Single Delivery Plan – consultation
- Conclusion Inclusion through Innovation: Tackling Social Exclusion through New Technologies (Social Exclusion Unit 2005)

www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/07/16085900/0

- The Scottish Government – The Ten Standards Positive evaluation
- Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010: Section 112(1)

www.wlga.gov.uk/

- WLGA - 'Citizen-Centred Scrutiny' - Engaging the Public in Overview and Scrutiny: Overview & Scrutiny Publications: Improvement and Governance: Publications: Welsh Local Government Association
- Member Support and Development: Improvement and Governance: Our work: Welsh Local Government Association
- WLGA Community Leadership Induction course

www.psucymru.org.uk/rba

(Partnership Support Unit) Developing an outcome based approach
Public Health Practitioner's Public Engagement Toolkit

www.neweconomics.org

www.neweconomics.org/publications/crowd-wise

coi.gov.uk/

(Cabinet Office Information)

- Effective public engagement: A guide for policy-makers and communications professionals
- Public engagement briefing form

www.nlgn.org.uk

(New local government network)

- Changing Behaviours: Opening a new conversation with the citizen (Nigel Keohane)

www.participationhub.org.uk (English) (Launched early June 2012)
www.participationhub.org.uk/PorthCyfranogiad/ (Welsh). (Launched early June 2012)

www.interactnetworks.co.uk