

Review of Public Engagement – Wrexham County Borough Council

Audit year: 2021-22

Date issued: June 2022

Document reference: 2900A2022

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Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

- 1 We reviewed Wrexham County Borough Council's (the Council's) arrangements for engaging with and involving the public in shaping service delivery. We looked at how the Council strategically plans engagement, how it carries out engagement activity, and how it monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of its arrangements.
- 2 In 2012, Audit Wales published the report Public Engagement in Local Government. This report concluded, '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 coordination; feedback is rarely provided to the public and monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the public engagement are weak.' The report reached 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.
- 3 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 highlights the importance of involving people with an interest in achieving the Council's well-being goals and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of the area which the body serves. In considering changes to policies and services, councils are expected to be able to demonstrate how they have sought the views of people affected by the change and addressed these in planning and delivery of the change.
- 4 The Council's Plan 2020-23 explains the Council's commitment to engaging with local people. Specifically, it refers to wanting to:
 - have a better understanding of where European Union national and other Black Asian and Minority Ethnic communities are living in order to support and engage with them;
 - develop a new ICT and Digital strategy which will enable the Council to modernise the way it works and engages with its customers;
 - enable services to engage with groups and individuals with protected characteristics to help them provide services which consider equality;
 - engage households with its recycling and waste reduction aims to ensure it is on track to meet its 2025 statutory recycling targets; and
 - increase consultation and engagement activities undertaken through the Your Voice Wrexham digital platform.
- 5 The Council formally adopted its Involvement Strategy 2018-22 in June 2018. The vision outlined in this strategy was, 'All people have access to the information they

need to influence the planning and delivery of services. They are engaged and consulted with on decisions which affect them and, where possible, we work together to design and deliver services.' The Involvement Strategy 2018-22 identifies three main areas of work under the overall concept of involvement:

- Consultation – an exercise to gather people’s views on specific proposals to help make a decision;
- Engagement – an ongoing conversation where the Council listens to what people want to tell it, and seek to understand their views on a range of ideas; and
- Co-production – working with people and communities in equal partnership to develop and deliver services that matter, together.

6 The importance placed on public participation by the Welsh Government is strengthened by the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 which requires councils to:

- promote awareness among local people of the Council’s functions;
- promote awareness among local people of how to become a member of the Council and what membership entails;
- facilitate access for local people to information about decisions made, or to be made, by the Council;
- promote and facilitate processes by which local people may make representations to the Council about a decision before, and after, it is made;
- arrange for the views of the public to be brought to the attention of the overview and scrutiny committees; and
- promote awareness among members of the Council of the benefits of using social media to communicate with local people.

7 We undertook the review during the period January 2022 to March 2022.

What we found

8 Our review sought to answer the question: Does public engagement enable citizens to help shape what the Wrexham County Borough Council does?

9 Overall, we found that: The Council has made good progress in embedding the 10 National Principles for Public Engagement, but stronger coordination and evaluation of its involvement activity would bring further benefit. We reached this conclusion because:

- Strategy - the Council has a clear, high-level Involvement Strategy in place which emphasises the importance of working with collaboratively with residents through consultation, engagement, and co-production;
- Principle 1 – involvement is embedded within the Council’s culture and there is a clear move towards consultation, engagement, and co-production;
- Principle 2 – whilst the Council is driving consultation, engagement and co-production, a number of activities have had low response rates;

- Principle 3 – the Council has recognised the need to have greater control and coordination of its involvement activities;
- Principle 4 – the Council works with a range of partners, but it needs to do further work to ensure the coordination of involvement activity;
- Principle 5 – most of the Council’s involvement activity is easy to understand, however a very small number of activities use confusing language;
- Principle 6 – the Your Voice Wrexham tool is the main way in which the Council involves its residents and whilst it is effective, the Council has opportunities to engage more widely;
- Principle 7 – the Council has a clear commitment to involve residents and constantly looks at ways to make this happen;
- Principle 8 – there is effective training on the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub, but the Council could further develop training opportunities;
- Principle 9 – the Council uses the You Said, We Did reports to provide feedback effectively, and has taken action to strengthen feedback arrangements; and
- Principle 10 – the Council has opportunities to improve benchmarking, the sharing of good practice, and the coordination of involvement activity findings.

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

The table below sets out the recommendations that we have identified following this review.

Recommendations	
Develop the central coordination of involvement activities	
R1	The Council should develop a mechanism to centrally coordinate involvement activity (including PSB activity) to reduce the risks of duplicating work and causing engagement fatigue.

Recommendations

Develop the mechanisms to evaluate involvement activity

R2 The Council should develop a number of practices to ensure it maximises the evaluation of its completed involvement activity:

- a formal mechanism to collect and share good practice
 - a formal mechanism to benchmark activity with other organisations
 - a process for collating and monitoring officer evaluations completed post-activity
 - a way of analysing the cost effectiveness of each involvement activity
 - a method for collecting participant feedback on improving involvement activity
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Develop the coordination of the findings from involvement activities

R3 The Council should develop a method for coordinating the findings and good practice from the range of involvement activities it undertakes to maximise learning and reduce duplication of work.

Detailed report

The Council has made good progress in embedding the 10 National Principles for Public Engagement, but stronger coordination and evaluation of its involvement activity would bring further benefit

10 We have structured this report using the National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales¹. These principles were developed by Participation Cymru and have been endorsed by Welsh Government. There is a paragraph for each principle plus one for strategy. Under each principle we have described the strengths and areas for improvement we found.

Strategy

The Council has a clear, high-level Involvement Strategy in place which emphasises the importance of working with collaboratively with residents through consultation, engagement, and co-production

11 We identified the following strengths:

- the Council has a high-level Involvement Strategy 2018-22 in place. This Strategy clearly emphasises the importance the Council places on involving and working collaboratively with residents.
- the Involvement Strategy is described by the Council as an over-arching or 'umbrella' strategy to a number of other engagement/participation strategies which exist in various services:
 - the Housing Tenant and Leaseholder Participation Strategy;
 - the draft Wrexham's Children's Rights Participation Strategy 2022-25 (which will replace the Engagement Strategy for the Children's Social Care Department 2015-18 and the Wrexham Children and Young Person's Participation Strategy 2017-20); and
 - the draft Public Participation Strategy.
- the Involvement Strategy 2018-22 has a clear, straightforward vision, 'All people have access to the information they need to influence the planning and delivery of services. They are engaged and consulted with on decisions which affect them, and where possible we work together to design and deliver services.'

¹ <https://wcva.cymru/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/National-Principles-for-Public-Engagement-Egwyddorion-Cenedlaethol-ar-gyfer-Ymgysylltu-ar-Cyhoedd.pdf>

- beneath the vision, the Involvement Strategy 2018-22 clearly defines three areas of activity the Council carries out – consultation, engagement, and co-production. The Strategy explains the aims of each area and describes what success will look like.
 - the Council plans to update the Strategy later this year using its Involvement Strategy Action Plan which outlines the work to be done.
- 12 We identified the following opportunity for improvement:
- not all the ‘sub-strategies’ make explicit reference to the overall strategy, and there is scope to strengthen the integration of these approaches, or even move to a single whole Council strategy.

Principle 1 – Engagement is effectively designed to make a difference

Involvement is embedded within the Council’s culture and there is a clear move towards consultation, engagement, and co-production

- 13 We identified the following strengths:
- involvement is embedded within the Council’s culture – the topic is clearly valued within the Council, there is leadership from the top of the organisation.
 - the Council undertakes a great deal of involvement activity, with both the number of events and responses received increasing from 2015.
 - officers within the Council clearly understand the importance of involvement activity and the benefits it brings. They could provide clear examples of all three areas identified in the Involvement Strategy 2018-22.
 - officers described a two-stage understanding of how involvement makes a difference:
 - the development of strategic documents and improved proposals, leading to a smoother passage through the approval process; and
 - the enhancement of services where they work better, deliver improved outcomes, and/or have higher levels of customer satisfaction.
 - work is currently taking place in preparation for the Local Government and Elections Act (Wales) 2021 which places increased importance on public participation. The Council has drafted a Public Participation Strategy to explain how it will comply with the requirements of the Act. The Council’s Governance and Customer Service is leading on this work.
 - the Council produces ‘You Said, We Did’ reports following consultations. These reports contain a section entitled ‘What difference has it made?’ which is written after a decision has been made so the Council can see the full impact of the involvement. The reports are stored on the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub where they are available publicly.

- the Council's consultation on its Strategic Equality Plan 2020-24 led to a significant change between the draft and final objectives.
- 14 We identified the following opportunity for improvement:
- the Council has not yet planned the training for officers and councillors on the public participation requirements of the Local Government and Elections Act (Wales) 2021. We were told the Council is waiting on guidance from Welsh Government before it progresses its plans.

Principle 2 – Encourage and enable everyone affected to be involved, if they so choose

Whilst the Council is driving consultation, engagement and co-production, a number of activities have had low response rates

- 15 We identified the following strengths:
- the Council's Strategic Equality Plan 2020-24 contains a specific objective about involving everyone, 'Involve all and ensure we use information about those who use our service (including those with protected characteristics) to make good decisions'.
 - the Council has developed a set of standardised equality monitoring questions which are available for every piece of involvement activity. The information obtained from these questions enables the Council to monitor if its involvement activity is reaching all audiences. However, the questions are not mandatory, and some services may adapt them to the specific engagement, use a sub-set, or choose not to use them at all.
 - the Council uses a range of methods to publicise and complete involvement work. Whilst the pandemic prevented face-to-face engagement, the Council held online meetings and interacted with community Facebook sites for the first time.
 - there is a strong desire within the Council to develop co-production. There is a clear emphasis within the Involvement Strategy 2018-22 and officers were able to provide examples. This is an area of work which the Council wishes to expand.
 - the Council's Community Cohesion Team sits within the Performance Improvement and Partnerships Service (PIPS). This team has strong links with a range of hard-to-reach groups and groups representing people with protected characteristics.
 - the Community Cohesion Team updated their directory of contacts for groups or individuals with protected characteristics during the pandemic. The Team provides this directory to all services completing involvement work so they can reach out to these groups directly.
 - the Council engages with its Senedd yr Ifanc frequently to capture the view of young people in Wrexham.

16 We identified the following opportunities for improvement:

- several of the Council's involvement activities appear to have low numbers of responses, The Council needs to set out what success looks like and develop alternative ways to reach potential respondents where appropriate. For example, consultations on the Wrexham PSB Wellbeing Assessment (885 responses) and Wrexham's Last Trams (385) both received high numbers of responses. However, consultations on the draft Council Plan 2020-23 (98), and the Housing Support Grant Delivery Plan 2021-22 (185) were significantly lower.
- whilst the Council has created a set of standardised equality monitoring questions, it should ensure the questions are used consistently to provide a standardised set of information. This would allow the Council to assure itself its involvement activity is reaching all audiences.

Principle 3 – Engagement is planned and delivered in a timely and appropriate way

The Council has recognised the need to have greater control and coordination of its involvement activities

17 We identified the following strengths:

- the Council has a two-tiered process for managing its involvement activity. The PIPS team leads on large scale activity (such as the Council Plan and the Budget) with all other activity being carried out by the individual services.
- there is a Consultation and Engagement Toolkit in place, supporting the overall approach outlined in the Involvement Strategy 2018-22. The Toolkit focuses on two of the three involvement areas identified by the Council and does not cover co-production. The Council told us that it is currently reviewing the Toolkit, and the updated version will contain a section on Co-Production.
- the aim of the toolkit is to ensure quality and consistency across the Council's services in all consultation and engagement work. It refers to the Gunning Principles, the 10 National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales, and offers a step-by-step guide to completing consultation and engagement work.
- there is a dedicated page on the Council's intranet which houses the Involvement Strategy 2018-22, the Consultation and Engagement Toolkit, and links with the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub.

18 We identified the following opportunities for improvement:

- whilst the PIPS team is responsible for large scale consultation and engagement activity, and despite the Consultation and Engagement Toolkit signposting the reader to PIPS if they have any queries, the exact role of the PIPS team is unclear to the wider services. We were told there is no specific

involvement/engagement team within the Council. Officers told us they felt they had to complete involvement activity on their own and would like clarity on the available support.

- as each service is responsible for its own involvement activity, there is a lack of central coordination which can lead to duplication of work and may cause possible ‘involvement fatigue’ among participants. This is a particular risk to those groups who may be approached several times on various pieces of work. The Council has identified this area of improvement and states it wishes to produce a central calendar of activity to improve scheduling and reduce the risk of duplication.

Principle 4 – Work with relevant partner organisations

The Council works with a range of partners, but it needs to do further work to ensure the coordination of involvement activity

19 We identified the following strengths:

- the Council has identified co-production as one of its three themes within its Involvement Strategy 2018-22. The definition of co-production in that strategy focuses on working in partnership to develop and deliver services. The Council is working with citizens, carers, the five other Councils across north Wales, Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, and a range of third sector organisations to co-develop integrated models for learning disabilities services. The aim of this work is to create a single, integrated approach, structure, and process to provide a seamless service to people with learning disabilities across north Wales.
- the Council led on the 2021 consultation work for the PSB Wellbeing Assessment across a large geographical footprint. This work generated over 800 responses.
- the Council has engaged with the Co-production Network for Wales to work on a regional basis for the next five years on the PSB Wellbeing Assessment process. The Network also provides the Council with support and acts as a critical friend for future co-production work.
- the Council has ambitions to create an ongoing regional engagement group and is working with the PSB Officers’ Group and the North Wales Research and Insight Partnership (NWRIP).
- the Council works with its Senedd yr Ifanc on many involvement activities.
- during the Covid pandemic, the Council included the Association of Voluntary Organisations in Wrexham (AVOW) as part of its emergency response team. This has strengthened the Council’s working relationship with AVOW, who is a key partner in reaching the vulnerable in the community.

20 We identified the following opportunity for improvement:

- in the future, when planning its coordination of internal involvement activity across services, the Council should include the activity it completes with the PSB. This will avoid duplication of work and further 'involvement fatigue.'

Principle 5 – The information provided will be jargon free, appropriate, and understandable

Most of the Council's involvement activity is easy to understand, however a very small number of activities use confusing language.

21 We identified the following strengths:

- the Council's main method for engaging with the public is via online surveys through the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub. It publicises the surveys through a variety of methods and supports the engagement with virtual meetings and councillor workshops.
- whilst most consultations are completed via the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub, the Council also sends out hard copy materials to those who request them.
- the Council produces 'easy read' versions of policies and consultation documents to support involvement activity.

22 We identified the following opportunity for improvement:

- the language used on a very small number of involvement activities is confusing and incomplete. The Council needs to ensure all activity is open and supported with transparent feedback. For example, the consultation on Wrexham's Local Development Plan via the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub during February 2021:
 - 'What do we want to know? Consultation on the Schedule of Matters Arising Changes(KPD26), SA (KPD27), HRA (KPD28 & KPD28a) and Phosphorous Reduction Strategy (EBNB04) will take place for a 6 week period between xxxxxx'.

Principle 6 – Make it easier for people to take part

The Your Voice Wrexham tool is the main way in which the Council involves its residents and whilst it is effective, the Council has opportunities to engage more widely

23 We identified the following strengths:

- the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub is an effective digital tool enabling a wide range of people to take part in involvement activity. The You Said, We Did reports are stored within Your Voice Wrexham and are easily accessible.

- The Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub encourages those people who complete a consultation to sign up to the Council's digital 'My Account' platform on Wrexham.gov.uk. 'My Account' is used by the Council to manage a number of digital services and allows the user to indicate a preference for receiving information about current and future engagement activities. The Council told us it is developing a mechanism where it will send regular emails to 'My Account' users who have selected the preference to inform them of current and future consultations.
- the Covid pandemic has seen a rapid move towards digital services, which may result in digital exclusion for some residents. The Council has recognised this and created the Digital Inclusion Group to help the digitally disadvantaged by providing training and resources, and ensuring non-digital channels remain available.

24 We identified the following opportunity for improvement:

- the Senedd yr Ifanc members believed the Council only engaged with them on topics it considered as 'young people issues' and felt they could also provide views on a wider range of issues, such as housing, social care, and the Council's Decarbonisation Plan.

Principle 7 – Enable people to take part effectively

The Council has a clear commitment to involve residents and constantly looks at ways to make this happen

25 We identified the following strengths:

- the Council uses a range of methods to involve residents effectively, such as online surveys, websites, focus groups, workshops (face-to-face and virtual), presentations, consultation documents, letters, design models, and videos.
- as part of the City of Culture bid, the Council has tried innovative ways to involve the local community. The Council has provided small-scale grants (of less than £1,000) for people to create cultural submissions and help shape the bid. This work has also been supported by the creation of a cross-party working group of councillors.
- the officers we spoke to express the importance of explaining to those who took part in the involvement activity why not all views were put into practice. It was clearly understood that whilst it was important to explain why things were happening, it was also important to say why certain things were not happening.
- during the Covid pandemic, the Communications Team engaged with community Facebook sites for the first time.
- the PIPS team told us about plans to introduce engagement champions in the services as they rolled out the updated Involvement Strategy 2018-22 later in 2022.

Principle 8 – Engagement is given the right resources and support to be effective

There is effective training on the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub, but the Council could further develop training opportunities

26 We identified the following strengths:

- the Council delivers in-depth training on how to use the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub. This training was previously delivered via face-to-face workshops but during the Covid pandemic the Council adapted this training to run virtually.
- the PIPS team is currently developing an e-learning module on consultation and engagement, to support the existing Toolkit. The officers we spoke to thought this module would be extremely helpful.
- the Council has identified the need to develop social media training for councillors, as part of its response to the duties from the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act (2021). We were told by the Council that social media training will be provided to councillors following the May 2022 elections as part of the councillor and lay member induction process.
- the Consultation and Engagement Toolkit contains a section on analysing the results from involvement activity. It stresses the importance of allocating sufficient time to the analysis process and ensuring those carrying out the analysis have the necessary skills and experience.

27 We identified the following opportunities for improvement:

- the officers we spoke to were satisfied with the technical training they received on using involvement tools. However, they would like to see wider training available on topics such as analysing results, providing effective feedback, and understanding the aim and purpose of involvement.
- the section on analysis in the Toolkit is brief (two pages). Officers told us they would like more guidance in this area. The Council is currently using an academic paper² to provide guidance for users. As part of the review of the Toolkit, the Council told us it will produce a more user-friendly version of the principles contained in the in-depth, academic paper.
- we saw no evidence of cost analysis for completed involvement activity.

² Braun, Virginia and Clarke, Victoria (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2). pp. 77-101.

Principle 9 – People are told the impact of their contribution

The Council uses the You Said, We Did reports to provide feedback effectively, and has taken action to strengthen feedback arrangements

28 We identified the following strengths:

- the Involvement Strategy 2018-22, Consultation and Engagement Toolkit, and training provided for the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub all emphasise the importance of providing feedback.
- the Toolkit suggests when, how and to whom an officer should provide feedback. A feedback template is included in the Toolkit which covers the purpose, the methods, the response, and the results.
- the You Said, We Did Reports provide explicit feedback through the sections, 'What do we want to know?' 'What We Found Out,' and 'What Difference Has It Made?' These reports are readily available online.
- the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub has the facility to allow the survey author to include a question at the end which asks if the respondent would like to receive direct feedback.
- the Council encourages consultation respondents to sign up to 'My Account' on Wrexham.gov.uk to receive information about current and future consultation and engagement activities.

29 We identified the following opportunities for improvement:

- when setting up a project on the Your Voice Wrexham online engagement hub, the guidance encourages the author to complete the feedback section. However, this section is optional which may explain why some of the reports do not have the 'What we found out' and 'What difference has it made' sections completed. Some reports also have little detail in the 'What difference has it made?' section which adds only limited value to the reader.
- the Council has identified the need to improve compliance on providing feedback using Your Voice Wrexham. Work has started to action this by sending out auto-reminders to consultation leads. The Council is also looking at ways to generate automatic reports on feedback non-compliance. Improving feedback has been a focus of the Council's Governance Officer Group after monitoring the content in Your Voice Wrexham.

Principle 10 – Learn and share lessons to improve the process of engagement

The Council has opportunities to improve benchmarking, the sharing of good practice, and the coordination of involvement activity findings

30 We identified the following strengths:

- the Consultation and Engagement Toolkit stresses importance of evaluating activity to help ensure quality and cost effectiveness of future activities.
- the Toolkit states the reader should evaluate their activity against the National Principles for Public Engagement. It includes a link to an evaluation toolkit hosted on the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) website.
- the Involvement Strategy Action Plan Q2 2021-22 includes actions to provide regular updates on good practice throughout the Council and provide quarterly reports on engagement activity and key themes identified to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT).
- the Head of PIPS sits on the SLT and can advise, signpost and question senior colleagues on involvement activity.
- the Council has several performance measures relating to involvement activity under the 'Modern and Resilient Council' priority in the Corporate Plan.

31 We identified the following opportunities for improvement:

- we were told about ways in which good practice was informally shared within the Council, but we found no formal mechanism. The actions on sharing good practice and presenting a quarterly report to SLT have not yet started. This is due to the increased workload in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- we were told about informal benchmarking involvement activity with other councils, but we found no formal mechanism. The Council is engaged with partnership across North Wales (for example, the North Wales Research and Insight Partnership). The Council told us they were having discussions with partners about good practice and reducing duplication of engagement activity.
- whilst the Consultation and Engagement Toolkit signposts readers to a resource to evaluate activity, there is no central collation or coordination of the evaluations. We did not see any evidence to illustrate involvement activities were being evaluated by officers. We did not see any evidence of participants being given the opportunity to say how the activity could have been improved.
- the Council has identified it could strengthen arrangements to coordinate the findings from its various involvement activities.



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