

## **Are There Additional Ways The Council Can Improve Public Participation?**

### **Summary of Benchmarking Data**

A group of 15 Unitary Authority Councils were compared which looked at:

- how each one operates in public participation at Full Council meetings;
- what information is provided on their website to make the public aware of how they can have their say; and
- how easy it is to use their website.

The data gathered from the benchmarking found that many of the councils had a similar process to asking a question at Full Council meetings.

At all councils, members of the public were welcome to attend any meeting unless specified. At Middlesbrough Council, members of the public had to book their seats in advance.

### **Number of Questions**

5 of the councils had a maximum of 1 question per person and 3 of the councils had a maximum of 2 questions per person. 1 of the councils had a maximum of 3 questions to be asked per meeting although it did not state if it was per person or in one meeting.

### **Number of Supplementary Questions**

4 of the councils allowed 1 supplementary question to be asked, 1 of the councils allowed for 1 supplementary question and 1 of the councils did not give the option of supplementary questions. All supplementary questions had to be related to the initial question or given answer from the initial question.

### **Time Limit for Questions**

The time limit for all questions in a Full Council meeting from the benchmarked group ranged from 15 minutes to 30 minutes for all questions, answers and supplementary questions. Slough Council had no time limit but instead had a maximum of 5 questions to be asked per meeting. Some of the councils such as Bristol and Essex included the presentation of petitions into the 30 minute time limit. Petitions were given priority in Bristol Council. Questions that were not answered in the meeting would be sent a written response or added to the next Full Council meeting which was the case in Wiltshire Council.

### **Deadlines for Questions**

The latest submission deadline for questions was 15 minutes before the start of a Full Council meeting which Milton Keynes Council practised. Some of the other councils required 2 clear working days before the day of the meeting. The earliest submission deadline was 7 working days before the day of the meeting. Some of the

councils in the benchmarked group had the dates of Full Council meetings on their website along with the deadline for submitting questions to council.

Essex County Council was less strict with the deadlines for Cabinet and Scrutiny meetings as they gave the public the opportunity to register to speak 15 minutes before the start of the meeting.

### Making A Statement

At Thurrock Council, statements were not acceptable at Full Council meetings; however, this was accepted in Milton Keynes, Bristol and Wiltshire Councils. Statements had to be related to an item on the agenda. In Wiltshire, the public could register to speak 10 minutes before the start of the meeting. In Milton Keynes, the Chair would ask if anyone wished to speak at the start of a Council, Cabinet or committee meeting or at the start of an item on the agenda; but each speaker was given a time limit of 4 minutes.

### Quality of Information

Most of the councils' website in the benchmarking group did not have a dedicated page to public participation. Some had no clear links to follow and instead had all the information within the Constitution which may not be easy for some members of the public to locate. Almost half of the benchmarked group had no information on call-ins and the few that did, had this information in the Constitution.

A few of the councils which included Hartlepool, Medway and Bristol Councils, had put together a useful booklet for the public on how they could get involved in council meetings. These would include items such as asking a question at meetings and how to submit a petition.

### How Thurrock Council is Doing

Overall, the information regarding public participation in Thurrock Council was more informative than the other councils in the benchmarked group. The sections on the website were divided clearly, some sub-sections could be further divided or moved to another section to make it easier to find.

To make deadlines for submitting questions to council clearer, this could be placed on the website along with the dates of Full Council meetings as some of the councils had done. A leaflet or guide for public participation could be provided (attached as appendix D) as well along with a form to fill in for submitting questions for council meetings (attached as appendix E).