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Dear *Huw*

#SeneddNewport initiative

Thank you for your letter asking about the City of Democracy project and the Council's experiences of community engagement.

My thinking behind the City of Democracy concept is to build on the growing sense of optimism in Newport. One of the key challenges for us has been finding a distinctive narrative for the city which binds everyone together; something which all the key partners in the city are able to connect with and reflects our history as well as the future opportunities.

Promoting Newport as the City of Democracy reflects the city's history, most notably through the Chartist movement, but also the challenges and opportunities of today, where engaging communities in decision making and the regeneration of the city can be difficult.

We commissioned a specialist consultancy to look at how we could build on our historical legacy, to bring about a cultural re-invention of the city, which benefits the local economy and the wellbeing of our communities. They recommended that we should focus our attention on:

- Identifying a branding strategy for Newport as the City of Democracy
- Measures to support co-operative and mutual ownership for local businesses and services
- Including the 'Newport Story' in the school curriculum to engage and enthuse young people
- Using Newport's citizen's panel to trial new digital democracy tools which will open up public debates on policy and decision making
- Creating a Festival of Democracy, drawing on historic and modern contexts to generate public debate, whilst promoting the city to visitors. This will tie in with Newport's growing reputation as tourist destination.

You also asked about our intention to investigate digital democracy tools. For more than a decade we have used a citizen's panel, made up of 1,000 local people who we consult with on a variety of service and strategy issues.



Contact with panel members increasingly uses e-mail and online survey software, however we know that technology has moved forward in recent years with the advent of social media tools. The Council has a direct reach of at least 20,000 residents through its own social media communications. Working with our partner organisations this reach extends further.

Recent engagement work has used the citizen's panel in tandem with social media surveys to widen the reach and response rate. This helped us achieve our highest ever response rates to the budget consultation and also for a visioning exercise (the WFG Act engagement work). With that in mind I have asked my officers to look into the potential benefits of social media engagement tools to support greater openness in relation to the democratic process, however I am also mindful of the climate of austerity and would not wish to commit to untested potential solutions.

We are in early discussions with Building Communities Trust who are working in Pillgwenlly, one of our most disadvantaged and least cohesive wards, considering use of a digital engagement tool to build consensus on a long-term vision and priorities.

The City of Democracy programme recognises that our work on engagement and involvement is on a continuum and that we need to move towards more participatory methods and greater empowerment of citizens. I am also keen to ensure that we do not forget that engagement is about listening and learning, and to this end we need to have cyclical processes in place where each year we build on our knowledge and customer insight.

We now have four years of experience in publishing ward profiles which provide details on social, economic, environmental and cultural conditions and complement our city-wide assessments (e.g. Assessment of Local Wellbeing, Population Needs Assessment) and qualitative engagement based data.

Another aspect of our improved engagement arrangements is our stronger collaborative approach.

We are increasingly working with our partners for example in the third sector (e.g. Community Voices project, British Deaf Association, Care to Listen project), local housing associations, the Newport Live leisure trust who are often closer to client groups and local communities than the Council.

In practice this has meant collaborative coordination and planning of engagement activity which has allowed us to embed engagement activities in community events, rather than relying on specific engagement events, in doing so using our resources more efficiently

I hope this gives you the information you need but if you have any further questions—

please do not hesitate to contact me .
Cofion
Debbie

Cllr. Debbie Wilcox
Leader, Newport City Council