

Agenda Item No: 9 **Report No: 143/12**
Report Title: Democratic Conversations in Lewes District
Report To: Scrutiny Committee **Date: 6 September 2012**
Cabinet Member: Councillor James Page
Ward(s) Affected: All
Report By: Head of Communications
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Purpose of Report:

- 1 To receive the Action Plan
- 2 To make any recommendations to Cabinet in order to deliver the Action Plan

Officers' Recommendations:

- 1 That the Scrutiny Committee makes any recommendations in order to assist the delivery of the Action Plan
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Reasons for Recommendations

- 1 To promote new forms of democratic and civic conversation in our area, so we keep in touch better with local people

Background Information

- 1.1** At its meeting on 7 September 2011, Cabinet considered a report prepared by the Democratic Society on a package of measures to improve democratic conversation in the district. The term "democratic conversation means "the interaction between the public sector and citizens that goes beyond single consultation exercises on specific issues, and builds a continuing dialogue in an environment of mutual trust and shared responsibility".
- 1.2** Cabinet agreed to carry out consultation with town and parish councillors, and other stakeholders, on the ideas in the Democratic Society's report and to report back to Cabinet on

views received, a proposed action plan to implement proposals, and necessary resources to implement it.

1.3 The views received are summarised as follows: Town & Parish representatives (clerks and councillors) who attended the annual town and parish conference in October 2011 were asked to complete a “communicating better with you” questionnaire. Of the responses received (12 in total) – 10 said preferred method of contact was by e-mail, 2 said by phone if the information was urgent and if not then email. Town & Parish Councils were generally happy to populate their website with information from the District Council, if of local interest and relevance to local residents and groups. In addition a separate consultation was carried out to gain feedback on the suggested actions contained within the proposed action plan, in connection with the rural affordable housing scrutiny review “evidence collecting day” at Cooksbridge, attended by a number of town and parish councils.

1.4 The Democratic Conversations in Lewes District Report highlighted sixteen recommendations. These were considered by the LDC Community Engagement Working Group (a cross departmental officer group) as well as the Town and Parish Councils. As a result of those discussions the following priorities emerged:-

Recommendation 2 – Provide a “towns and parishes access point” within LDC, whose responsibility is to help town and parish officers find their way to the right person on particular issues of concern and

Recommendation 3 – Indicate more clearly to towns and parishes the issues that ought to be of most interest to them when disseminating information and respond to the points raised in consultations.

Recommendation 5 – Support councillors at district and parish level, and clerks, in their emerging roles as convenors of democratic conversation.

Recommendation 7 - Provide demographic and performance information at a scale people can understand. (Our role – to be “enablers” and assist Town and Parishes to find information on the Census and “East Sussex In Figures” database.

Recommendation 8 - Provide example constitutions, basic legal advice and support for civic action. In addition invite town and parish representatives to training sessions that the council is holding for staff, e.g. planning, equalities, civic action. Also provide draft templates on equality impact assessments and any other documentation that is available and relevant to be used.

Recommendation 9 – Direct staff volunteering at civic action.

Recommendation 10 – Show that the council is actively listening.

Recommendation 11 – Create a light touch participation signup.

Recommendation 12 - Provide officers to assist those involved in the preparation of neighbourhood plans in a professional and informal way. This has already begun with an appointment of a neighbourhood planning officer following decisions by Cabinet in March 2012.

Recommendation 13 – Support local innovators.

Additional Recommendation - Pilot parish council project – to improve democratic engagement prior to elections 2015

Additional Recommendation – Use the District Council’s pam (Platform for Achieving More) software to work more closely with Town & Parish Councils on joint projects.

2 Action Plan

- 2.1** At its meeting on 30 May 2012, Cabinet agreed the Action Plan, as set out in Appendix B to this Report,

Financial Appraisal

- 3** To sustain the additional communications and engagement activities set out in Appendix B, both now and in the future, resource need has been assessed at a fixed term contract (initially for one year) part time post for 18 hours a week. The Action Plan involved some other legal and democratic services work, beyond the communications team, and the postholder could assist with this wider work, as part of the role.

Risk Appraisal

- 4** I have completed a risk assessment in accordance with the Council’s risk management strategy.

Environmental Implications

- 5** I have completed the Environmental Implications questionnaire and there are no significant effects as a result of the recommendations in this report.

Equality Considerations

- 6** As no potential negative impacts were identified, a full equality impact assessment is not required.

Appendix

Appendix A – Summary of Recommendations: Democratic Conversation in Lewes District

Appendix B – Action Plan