

West Lothian Council Participation Request Annual Report 2017/18

Introduction

West Lothian Council Executive approved the council's participation request process in March 2017. An application form was made available on the council's website, along with a 'Toolkit' which aims to guide community groups through the process.

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 requires public authorities to publish a participation request annual report, which should include the number of participation requests received; number of requests agreed and refused; number of requests which resulted in changes to a public service provided by, or on behalf of, the public service authority; and any action taken by the public service authority to promote and support the use of participation requests. West Lothian Council received no valid requests in 2017/18; however this report outlines ongoing work with one local community group and the work undertaken to promote and support participation requests.

West Lothian Council Participation Request Process

The council's Community Planning and Regeneration Team are the 'gatekeepers' for all requests coming in to the council. Community groups are strongly encouraged to discuss any potential requests with officers before submitting a formal request. For each request received, a 'Participation Request Panel' will be identified, chaired by the council's Head of Planning, Economic Development and Regeneration and made up of the relevant head(s) of service, officers and partners as required. Panel members will vary depending on the nature of the request. The Panel will be responsible for validating and making a decision on requests, unless it is agreed that decision making needs to take place at council committee (e.g. for more complex or larger scale requests). Further detail on the council's application and decision making process is available at:

<https://www.westlothian.gov.uk/article/21540/Participation-Requests>

Discussions have also been held with other local 'public service authorities', in order to gather key contact information in case of any joint requests and to ensure local processes and promotion of requests is aligned where possible.

It was agreed that this newly developed process would be reviewed upon completion of the first request received, to ensure the application and decision making process is fit for purpose. This review will include feedback from the community group who made the request.

Number of requests received in 2017/18

One participation request was received from Bathgate Community Council at the end of February 2018 but a Participation Request Panel was in agreement that further information was required in order to fully assess the request. This was therefore not validated within 2017/18.

Council officers have since worked with the community council to shape this into a valid request around increased awareness within the community of the council's Roads policies and where the community can influence and improve existing policies through local involvement. The request was re-submitted on 26 April 2018 and validated on 4 May 2018. The Panel agreed to the request and the outcome improvement process is currently being finalised. Full detail on this request will be included in the 2018/19 annual report.

Number of requests agreed and refused

As outlined above, no valid requests were received in 2017/18 and so none were agreed nor refused.

Number of requests which resulted in changes to a public service provided by, or on behalf of, the public service authority

As outlined above, no valid requests were received in 2017/18.

Action taken by the public service authority to promote and support the use of participation requests

West Lothian Council promoted and supported the use of participation requests through various different channels throughout 2017/18.

Support

- A dedicated participation request page has been set up on the council's website, providing information on the process and the relevant forms for making a request.
- A participation request 'Toolkit' has been developed to provide information on the purpose of participation requests and to guide community groups through the West Lothian Council process. This is available on the participation request page of the council's website.
- The application form also includes detailed guidance notes.
- All materials and information on the website include an offer of support to community groups for making a request and community groups are encouraged to engage with the council's Community Planning and Regeneration Team as early as possible around potential requests. This support includes signposting community groups to any existing mechanisms for involvement and engagement.
- Community Empowerment Act Frequently Asked Questions, specific to West Lothian, have also been developed and are available on the council's website:
<https://www.westlothian.gov.uk/article/16160/Community-Empowerment>

Promotion

- The council's participation request application form and Toolkit have been published on the council's website and the link shared widely.

- An article on the process was included in the CPP newsletter, which is distributed to local partners, local community organisations and members of the public who have signed up to receive updates.
- As well as providing information on the process through the website and online communication a series of sessions have been held, or are being organised, to take information out to community groups:
 - A ‘Community Empowerment Roadshow’ is being developed, to raise awareness of the different parts of the Act, including participation requests, within local community groups. A pilot session was held in Fauldhouse in August 2017 and it is intended that these sessions will be rolled out across West Lothian’s communities in 2018/19.
 - Voluntary Sector Gateway West Lothian delivered a session with the Scottish Community Development Centre on the Community Empowerment Act to a number of local third sector organisations in February 2018, with input from officers on the council’s participation request process.
 - The Joint Forum for West Lothian Community Councils has received a presentation on the Community Empowerment Act, including information on participation requests. The relevant information and application form has also been shared with community councils via the Joint Forum of Community Councils Knowledge Hub page.
- Information on the council’s process has also been shared with local community planning partners, both through email communication and through CPP Board reports.

Conclusion

West Lothian Council adopted its participation request process on 1 April 2017. An application form is available online and the council has taken steps to promote this process and to provide support to community groups looking to make a request.

No valid requests were received in 2017/18. One request was received at the end of February 2018; however it was agreed that further information was required for a decision to be made. Officers supported the community group to shape this into a valid request, which was submitted end of April 2018. Detail on the outcome of this process will be published on the council’s website and will be included in the annual report for 2018/19.

The council encourages community groups to discuss any potential requests with officers as early as possible. This provides an opportunity to discuss any support needs of the group, ensure the request is being made to the correct public body and to discuss whether any similar requests have been received. It may also be that the council and group can work together out-with the formal request process or there may be existing mechanisms for involvement. The number of participation requests received therefore does not reflect all activity to involve community bodies in improving local outcomes.