

To: Cabinet
Date: 10 March 2021
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Citizen Engagement

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Scrutiny-commissioned Citizen Engagement report
Key decision:	No
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Partnerships
Corporate Priority:	All
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020-24
Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report.	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 12 January 2021, the Scrutiny Committee considered a report it commissioned on Citizen Engagement. This topic was previously considered by Scrutiny as a potential Review Group topic. Whilst not selected, it is an issue of particular importance to the Committee.
2. The Panel would like to thank Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Partnerships for presenting the report, Mish Tullar, Corporate Policy, Partnership and Communications Manager, for

attending the meeting and proving support, and Hamera Plume for authoring the report and answering questions.

Summary and recommendation

3. Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council, introduced the report. Engagement with the City's citizens was of paramount importance. All Councillors would share a sense of frustration at the difficulty of face to face engagement with constituents given the constraints imposed as a result of the pandemic. On the other hand, the experience of the pandemic had shown how the Council could be more creative in its approach to engagement as well as building on innovations that were already in place. Engagement with local citizens through the local media was already well established, the Residents' Panel had already been set up, something which did not require face to face engagement. Online meetings had made it clear that audiences and participation for some activities could be greater than would otherwise have been the case. The Council's Citizens' Assembly had been a very significant element of the Council's engagement with residents, both as a process and in relation to possibly the most important issue facing the City and the world. The very rich output from the Assembly was still being worked through. Despite the good work being done already, it was important to be alive to the potential for improvement and finding new and diverse ways of engaging with residents. Councillor Brown sounded one note of caution, the current practice of holding statutory meetings remotely would require the introduction of primary legislation in few months' time and the Government had not yet taken any steps to do so.
4. Mish Tullar, Corporate Policy, Partnerships & Communications Manager, said that the process of preparing the report had proved to be very helpful in improving the team's understanding of the full spectrum of engagement activity. At the same time it was important to be clear that the report did not provide an exhaustive account. The report did not mention, for example, the regular contact between Councillors and their constituents, something in relation to which it might be helpful to establish a formal means of recording. Recent months had illustrated the great potential for digital engagement. A virtual Town Hall session, for example, had been "attended" by some 2000 people and seen by some 1000 people after the event. While digital communication was likely to play an increasingly important role, it would be important to ensure that those who could not or would not engage in that way were not disenfranchised.
5. The Committee's discussion and suggestions in response to the report focused on work done by other relevant bodies, namely the Oxfordshire Growth Board Scrutiny Committee, greater prominence for issues around different types of inequality, clarifying a number of terms within the text, and the desirability of recognising active transport and payment of the Living Wage as strategic desiderata in Oxfordshire.
6. The Scrutiny Committee makes ten recommendations, raising suggestions of new ways in which the Council might engage with its citizens more effectively, with a number aiming to engage those groups currently less represented in

consultation responses, as well as a number of ways to improve existing consultation and engagement activity.

New Ways to Engage Citizens

7. Discussion at the Committee recognised an important point – that engagement with residents is not an end in itself but part of a process that seeks to make the best decisions. It is the suggestion of the Committee that if engagement with residents is undertaken at some points of that process but not others, the ceiling of the best potential outcomes is lowered. Giving communities greater ownership over decision-making has the potential to create a virtuous circle whereby more ownership engenders greater engagement, leading to better outcomes and a willingness to take further ownership. Co-production is an approach which the Committee commends, providing fuller engagement with stakeholders throughout the decision-making process. Likewise, having control of money and selecting the priorities on which Council money is spent on behalf of residents is also an important form of ownership. The Committee encourages the Council to investigate how these two approaches could be taken forward.

Recommendation 1: That the Council investigates opportunities for co-production with key stakeholders, particularly local residents.

Recommendation 2: That the Council runs a pilot project to establish and assess the practicalities of engaging citizens in participatory budgeting.

Less Engaged Groups

8. Following questioning by the Committee, it was confirmed that there is a tendency for consultation responses to come from more affluent members of the City. Whilst in no way does it wish to denigrate responses made by those groups, the Committee recognises that in order for the Council to achieve its vision to 'build a world class city for everyone', it is important that it engages with and hears the voices of all sections of the City. The first step in doing achieving this is in understanding who does and does not engage with the Council, which can provide a base from which to take corrective action to engage underrepresented communities. The Committee recognises that not all consultations will be suitable to collect this data from, but encourages the Council to collect it is far as practicable.

Recommendation 3: That the Council monitors the response rates for suitable non-statutory consultations against indices of multiple deprivation, and protected characteristics within the Equality Act.

9. The increase in digital communication has been, overall, a positive in its enablement of communication with residents. However, as referenced above, that improvement is not necessarily manifested equally across different demographic groups. Non-representative responses to consultations can give a false impression of the public mood on an issue, with the potential that policy might reflect the concerns of the respondees, rather than the general populace. Although it does not yet have detailed data on the issue compared to what is

requested above, the Committee considers that active intervention is required to improve the representativeness of responses to consultations. Many of those who do not respond to consultations are likely to do so because they face some form of additional barrier, meaning they require additional support to engage. Council staff being physically present, who can help facilitate responses, are an important means of this rebalancing. The Committee identifies Temple Cowley Shopping Centre and the community centres around the City as places where a regular physical presence would be of particular value in this regard. It suggests that both analogue and digital forms of response should be available, the first for those unable to use digital, and the latter not only for its greater efficiency but also the opportunity it provides to teach people how to access consultations and participate digitally in the future.

Recommendation 4: That the Council, when conditions permit, has a regular physical presence, particularly at Temple Cowley shopping centre, but also at its community centres, and that it offers multiple channels, covering analogue and digital, to enable responses to be made.

10. In its discussion of the issue the Committee noted the importance for those with lower levels of literacy to be able to speak to someone who could support them with making a written response. Both elected members and Council officers could offer this form of support. The Committee highlighted planning consultations, being locally focused and fairly complex, as particularly likely to benefit from additional member or officer support, though not to the exclusion of other forms of consultation.

Recommendation 5: That the Council includes phone contact details with ward member and/or relevant officer details for those who require support with responding to consultations.

11. With an estimated 49% of residential properties being privately rented in Oxford, Oxford has one of the biggest private rented sector relative to its size of any housing authority in England. The Council currently holds regular meetings with key specific groups to ensure that it hears and considers feedback on their concerns. This does not, however, occur with the private rented sector. In light of the size of this people group, the challenges it faces in a particularly unaffordable city, and the Council's enforcement role on licensing issues, the Committee considers that it would be worthwhile if this were to change. It suggests the easiest way to hold regular meetings with private tenants would be through the tenant unions operating in the City.

Recommendation 6: That the Council holds regular meetings with private tenant unions.

Building on Existing Engagement

12. From discussion, the stand-out success of the Council's approach to engagement with stakeholders and residents was the Virtual Town Hall meeting. The event had brought together senior leaders from both councils, both universities, students unions and the police to answer both pre-submitted and live questions concerning the return of students to Oxford at the start of the academic year. The Committee was clearly pleased at the reach that the event managed, with 2000 people watching live and a further 1000 viewing afterwards on youtube. However, it was felt that a crucial part of its success was that the Council was seen to be

acting in response to the concerns of its residents, rather than being defined by its own responsibilities. Although the Council is not directly involved in the internal affairs of the City's universities, the viewing numbers were a demonstration of the leadership taken and relevance of the Council. The Committee is keen that this approach continues, but for the sake of the digitally-excluded does request a balance between in-person meetings and digital ones post-pandemic.

Recommendation 7: That the Council, when periods of significant public debate arise (including on areas not the direct responsibility of the Council), considers facilitating a public discussion over them similar to the recently-held Town Hall meeting.

13. One issue raised regularly throughout the meeting (and indeed prior to it) was the importance of elected members as being a conduit for information. In addition to being councillors, many hold other formal positions, from school governorships, to leading community groups and neighbourhood fora, leadership positions in religious organisations to trustees for charities. All are informally involved in the networks in their wards and other communities throughout the City. This often means that councillors are aware of the multiple viewpoints taken on an issue by different groups affected by it. Having expressed their views to Councillors, individuals or groups may consider themselves to have shared their position. Equally, comments may have been made to Councillors expressing a view as part of a different conversation. Either way, the Committee feels that there is a risk that not all this information will be subsequently shared in a formal response to consultation, resulting in engagement and consultation being lost because of the mode through which it was given.
14. The Committee notes that there a fine balance in allowing Councillors to speak on behalf of their communities, and letting communities speak for themselves. Both are legitimate sources of information, but there is a degree of tension between the two. At present, the Committee considers that the Council is skewed too far away from Councillor representation but recognises that this is a complex topic to get right. As such, it recommends that further work is done to understand how to achieve the right balance across the different types of consultation undertaken by the Council, and to formalise that through frameworks and guidelines.

Recommendation 8: That the Council creates frameworks and guidelines around how and when the Council will engage with and use its elected members when undertaking consultations.

15. A concern of the Committee is how the Council incorporates valuable feedback which, for whatever reason, is not presented within official consultation periods. The Committee recognises that with statutory consultations this is not possible as the Council is required to follow a particular process. However, being mindful of the fact that not every potential responder to consultations can make their response with the same ease – whether that be through awareness of the consultation's existence, language difficulty or other inequality-related reasons – the Committee considers that flexibility over deadlines where such flexibility is possible is a lesser evil than not including in consideration the voices of those who find responding more difficult than others.

Recommendation 9: That the Council is flexible in its approach to consultation periods in non-statutory consultations and is willing and able to allow feedback made outside the official consultation to be meaningfully considered.

Further Consideration

16. It is expected that the Committee is likely to follow up on elements on the issues raised in the Citizen Engagement report in the forthcoming civic year. However, a direct follow-up is not anticipated.

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