

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 Panel, 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 Templars Square 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 Templars Square 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.

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

11. 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.

12. 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.
13. 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.

14. 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 respondent 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

15. 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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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 12/01/2021 concerning the Scrutiny-Commissioned Citizen Engagement report

Response provided by Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Partnerships, Susan Brown

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Recommendation	Agree?	Comment
<p>1) That the Council investigates opportunities for co-production with key stakeholders, particularly local residents.</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p><i>The Business Plan 2021-22 already includes a number of actions to boost co-production including:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• Launch a Thriving Community Strategy with the principles of community engagement, involvement and participation. This will take a place-based approach that maximises opportunities for greater collaboration with key stakeholders and community groups to deliver outcomes that matter to the Council and local people.</i> <i>• Develop a more integrated frontline locality-based service delivery offer involving 6 locality hub teams that brings together housing, community services, tenancy management support, etc. to provide a framework for greater colocation with partners and an emphasis on community led co-productive social action – where residents are involved in decision making on matters that affect them directly</i> <i>• Develop the partnership with landlords and agents, taking a co-production approach to improve the quality and management of the Private Rented Sector (PRS).</i> <i>• Complete and implement the Zero Carbon Communities Strategy, with community engagement activity, using a co-production approach, to support residents and local groups taking action to achieve</i>

		<p><i>climate change targets; and raise wider public awareness of local action being taken.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Engage Council tenants to maximise their involvement in decisions on retrofitting that affect their homes.</i>
<p>2) That the Council runs a pilot project to establish and assess the practicalities of engaging citizens in participatory budgeting.</p>	In part	<p><i>The Business Plan 2021-22 includes an action to develop a micro-grant programme for local community groups to access and deliver against local priorities, as part of the strategic grants review.</i></p>
<p>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.</p>	In part	<p><i>As part of the current public consultation process we collect data around some of the protected characteristics. These typically include data around, age, ethnicity, gender, disability and postcode. However, for the Residents Panel we have much more detailed information about an individual as they have volunteered to be a member and agree to complete a recruitment questionnaire which also covers additional questions such as employment status and housing tenure.</i></p> <p><i>There is a balance that we need to strike between having enough data about a participant and not asking so much that it puts a potential participant off taking part. We need to be mindful of the fact that while some are happy to volunteer information about themselves, others are much more comfortable sharing a smaller amount of data. Also these questions are entirely voluntary so what we receive depends on how much a participant is willing to share.</i></p> <p><i>We have a new online portal launching in March in which we will have a standard set of equalities questions to be</i></p>

		<p><i>included in each online survey to ensure consistency in the data we are collecting.</i></p> <p><i>Carrying out analysis of the postcodes would also provide us with much richer information about which areas of the city responses are coming from and where they might be lacking. This can be achieved through mapping software that can be used alongside the consultation portal and together they can help us pinpoint where responses are coming from.</i></p>
<p>4) That the Council, when conditions permit, has a regular physical presence, particularly at Templars Square shopping centre, but also at its community centres, and that it offers multiple channels, covering analogue and digital, to enable responses to be made.</p>	<p>In part</p>	<p>As per the revision of the business plan for 21/22 – two key priority actions are planned that directly respond to recommendation 4, that will support residents to engage and consult digitally and physically too:</p> <p>Inclusive Economy:</p> <p>a) <i>Deliver the Customer Experience Strategy year 2 actions, including improving access and inclusion for our customers, <u>streamlining processes and maximising automation where possible with a particular focus on supporting and enabling people that do not have access to digital technologies to become more confident and connected.</u></i></p> <p>Thriving Communities:</p> <p>b) <i>Develop a more integrated <u>frontline locality-based service delivery offer involving 6 locality hub teams</u> that brings together housing, community services, tenancy management support, etc. to</i></p>

		<p><i>provide a framework for greater colocation with partners and an emphasis on:</i></p> <p><i>Community led co-productive social action – <u>where residents are involved in decision making on matters that affect them directly.</u></i></p> <p>Moreover, it is an implicit function that the Locality hub teams will facilitate consultation on key policy development areas – through local networks and facilitation techniques.</p>
<p>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.</p>	Yes	<p><i>With the agreement of ward members this information can be included alongside each consultation. On the consultation portal this can be included alongside other information about the consultation such as start and end dates, descriptions etc. For paper surveys this could also be easily included provided ward members are in agreement. For officers, again this information can be included with their agreement and the assurance that they would only be contactable during office hours.</i></p>
<p>6) That the Council holds regular meetings with private tenant unions.</p>	Yes	<p><i>The Business Plan 2021-22 includes an action to develop relationships with tenants groups to help enable tenants to be empowered in their relationships with landlords and agents.</i></p>
<p>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</p>	Yes	<p><i>It is clear we would want to utilise this engagement format in the future on an ad hoc basis and as appropriate.</i></p> <p><i>We would also like to resume running focus groups in person with residents when we are able to as this provides</i></p>

to the recently-held Town Hall meeting.		<i>us with a detailed insight into their views.</i>
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.	Yes	<i>Officers will look at the opportunity to include a Community Engagement Framework as part of the revised Community Engagement Policy Statement. All members should be alerted to the fact a consultation in their ward is taking place and should be encouraged to get involved to help collect information, particularly if a potential resident finds it difficult to contribute due to factors such as language barriers or IT concerns.</i>
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.	In part	<i>Consultations must have open and close dates as we usually need to collect the data in order to feed it into a strategy's development or a project timeline and leaving it open will not allow us do that. However we can include a note that states after the closing date people can give us their views with the caveat that they may be too late to be included in the official consultations findings/report. However they can be considered for any future work related to this consultation.</i>

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