

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET

19 September 2023

Consultation and Engagement Strategy

Report of Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Agree to respond to the recommendations contained in the body of this report, and
 - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and its recommendations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the Council's Consultation and Engagement Strategy at its meeting on 28 April 2023.
4. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Glynis Phillips, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Strategy, Insight, and Communications, Kerry Middleton, Head of Communications, Marketing and Engagement, and Carole Stow, Consultation and Engagement Manager for preparing and introducing the report, and for attending to answer questions.

SUMMARY

5. Glynis Phillips, Cabinet portfolio holder for Corporate Services introduced the report. The Consultation and Engagement Strategy has two key aims: 1) to engage with and listen to residents and other partners in a more active and inclusive way. This includes listening to what residents value most, involving them in conversations about the things that affect them, and then using that feedback to help shape or improve services, and 2) to widen the council's reach so that it listens to diverse communities and audiences. This includes those whose voices are seldom heard, such as young people and the digitally excluded. The Council's activity in delivering these aims were being pursued under three headings – i) building the right foundations, ii) enabling two-way conversations, and iii) expanding the Council's reach and being inclusive, for which the specific actions taken were detailed in the report.
6. In response to the presentation the Committee addressed the following issues for further discussion: the levels and mechanisms of support for teams across the Council to implement the Strategy's approach, how key priorities for residents were being identified, the degree of reach achieved by different communications and engagement media, and specific issues around the Let's Talk platform.
7. The Committee makes three formal recommendations around political ownership of consultation and engagement, broadening engagement through partnership-working and commitment to diversity by design principles, and further ways to leverage Let's Talk's success. It also wishes to highlight some general observations around what the blockers are in regards to achieving the Strategy's aims.

OBSERVATIONS

8. As referenced above, whilst the Committee fully supports the Council's stated aims for the Consultation and Engagement Strategy it wishes to share its concerns over some current practices which might get in the way of their fulfilment.
9. The most lengthy discussion was held over the volume of consultations. At first glance, it would be natural to assume that if the Council wishes to engage and consult more with its residents then it would need to be engaging in more consultation. This is not, however, the case. Indeed, trying to do too much consultation and engagement can lead to a more limited breadth of respondees. The more consultations there are, the greater the burden is for residents to be able to acquaint themselves with the issues to be able to make informed comment on proposals. For many residents time is pressured; for those groups whose views are seldom heard reading through consultation documents may well be a luxury which they cannot afford. Further to this, the more consultation and engagement available, the more difficult it is for any individual to sift out what is relevant to them and what is not. Again, this is liable to impact most negatively on those who already struggle to engage with

the Council. When it comes to communications and engagement, more is not necessarily better.

10. The Committee is pleased that there does appear to be a strong recognition of this fact, that how the Council engages and communicates is the key to broadening and increasing the level of engagement, not the volume available. That 'how' also happens to be the more challenging and complicated aspect. Over time it is easy to fall back into the 'more is better' mindset and the Committee seeks, therefore, to reiterate this risk and encourage ongoing vigilance.

Observation 1: To achieve meaningful, representative engagement the Council must continue to focus on how it undertakes communication and engagement rather than the volume.

11. Finally, and again linked to the point made above, the Committee feels that at present there is too little understanding by those consulted with on what consultation is and what members of the public can reasonably expect the outcomes to be. This is, the Committee recognises, challenging because different forms of communications and engagement have different roles, from learning people's views to explaining a determined policy. When it comes to consultation, informing policy is not the same as determining policy; members of the public's views are sought to provide information, experience and perspective on an issue, but it is ultimately the decision of democratically-elected officials to weigh the responses to determine the optimal policy. Some recent reactions to Council decisions have suggested that there is some way to go in communicating this, and that expectation amongst some parts of the public at least are that the Council's consultation exercises are really more akin to referenda. The Committee expects that investing further effort into setting expectations around consultation outcomes will prove beneficial in terms of the tone of ongoing public engagement.

Observation 2: That further investment in setting public expectations about the outcomes of engagement and consultation will be beneficial.

RECOMMENDATIONS

12. The Committee recognises that the Council relies on communications throughout its policy-making process. Communications help identify what local priorities are, which helps direct policy. Consultation and engagement form part of the policy-development process and provide feedback on potential policy proposals. When policies are agreed, communications often form a core plank in the delivery of that policy. So crucial is the working relationship between policy-setters and the communications function that one of the recommendations from the LGA peer review of communications at the Council was that there needs to be closer integration between the Leader and the Director of Communications.

13. A corollary of communications being so entwined with policy development, setting and delivery is that it forms more than an enabling function, and the further it moves away from this and towards what the Council actually 'does' the greater the requirement for political accountability over the way communications are delivered. This accountability has been achieved recently, with the Cabinet being asked to approve a Communications and Engagement Strategy for proposals around Oxford United Football Club, but this has not always been the case, even where proposals for consultation or engagement have been controversial. The Committee is keen that this approach, which it feels is a positive one, becomes standard practice when the Council wishes to engage in consultation and engagement on topics which are liable to be contentious.

Recommendation 1: That on issues expected to be contentious political leaders should be accountable via Cabinet or single Cabinet member decision for the consultation and engagement strategy, rather than officers

14. The Committee is extremely supportive of the Council's ambition for the Communications and Engagement Strategy that it gives voice to an increased breadth and diversity of residents. It is entirely sensible that the Strategy identifies ways to work with partners across the variety of sectors available and the Committee commends this. It does, however, make an observation that there is little listed in the strategy beyond this ambition, no road map for seeing how that will be realised. The Committee offers two suggestions to strengthen this. The first, to devise suitable SMART targets around partnership working for inclusion in the Strategy's annual refresh. At present, the Strategy commits to 'Use partnership networks even more effectively to make consultation engagement more accessible for target audiences, including seldom heard groups and digitally excluded, from January 2022.' The Committee views this as such a crucial area of work that it should have its own targets to show transparently the degree to which the Council has or has not achieved its aims. The current commitment does not do this.
15. The second is to commit to consultation for at least some key issues which is representative by design. This could mean using sampling for consultation to ensure a representative demographic response, but it could mean running deeper engagement exercises also, such as Citizens' Juries. The Committee is aware that there are cost and time implications to adopting such a rigorous and interventionist stance, but it considers the required level of expenditure and proactivity to be consistent with the Council's Strategic Priority to 'play our part in a vibrant participatory democracy.'

Recommendation 2: That at its next annual refresh of the Communications and Engagement action plan the Council strengthens its road-map for how it will leverage its partnerships to increase the breadth of engagement by including (but not limited to)

a) Creating SMART targets for partnership working

b) Committing to undertake engagement processes which are representative by design

16. During discussion, the Council's Let's Talk Oxfordshire platform was identified as an area of particular strength. The Communications and Engagement Strategy identifies increasing traffic to this platform as a specific priority for the current year and the Committee would like to see the Council explore a suggestion for how this might be achieved, specifically whether it can be developed as an app.
17. The Committee has two rationales which it feels would likely result: greater accessibility, and increased customisability. Launching the platform as an app would provide a different method through which to engage, one which younger people – a cohort the Communications Strategy specifically highlights as less engaged and requiring targeted activity – are most likely to be drawn towards. Making it easier for more people, particularly those from an under-represented group, to engage with the Council clearly fits within the Strategy's aim of extending the reach of its engagement. Equally, as referred to above, sifting through consultations to identify which are relevant can be a challenge in itself. Whilst, for example, the Let's Talk platform provides links to all the different 20mph limits currently being proposed they are not in an easy-to-find order, either alphabetical or split by geographical area. By nature, a well-designed app wants to filter out erroneous information and provide only what is relevant. Doing so would help enable users to manage the challenge of identifying issues which are relevant to them more quickly. Further, there is the capacity for notifying those who want to know about new issues of relevance to them. The effect of these functions is likely to increase the level of engagement. The Committee recognises that there are many other issues to consider, but it would like the Council to look into the business case for this suggestion further based on the prima initial benefits it has identified.

Recommendation 3: That the Council develop an outline business case for launching Let's Talk Oxfordshire in app form.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

18. The Committee does not currently have plans to reconsider this in the current civic year.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

19. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.'
20. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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