

Divisions Affected - All

PERFORMANCE & CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

28 April 2023

Update on progress against Oxfordshire County Council's Consultation and engagement strategy 2022-25

**Report by Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Communications,
Strategy and Insight**

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is RECOMMENDED to

Note the update provided on the council's consultation and engagement strategy 2022-25.

Executive Summary

1. The purpose of this report is to provide Performance & Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee with an update on progress against key actions in the council's consultation and engagement strategy 2022-25 and to set out milestones for the year ahead.

Background

2. In February 2022 Cabinet agreed a new consultation and engagement strategy for the council for the period 2022 – 2025. The strategy sets out a new approach to consultation and engagement, putting residents at the heart of decision-making to support strong, active and inclusive communities.
3. The strategy has two key aims:
 - 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.
 - To widen the council's reach so that we listen to diverse communities and audiences. This includes those whose voices are seldom heard, such as young people and the digitally excluded.

4. To achieve these twin aims, the strategy sets out a range of ways the council will provide for residents to have their say, across multiple channels, both on and offline. This will include using new methodologies and being more proactive – so going to the places where we can reach residents and stakeholders, rather than expecting them to come to us.
5. The strategy also outlines the council’s guiding principles for participation in all consultation or engagement activities and seeks to build on good practice both within the council and outside.
6. Accompanying the strategy is a detailed action plan, with clear targets and measures, which has been developed to ensure that progress is on track and there is a continued commitment to two-way engagement with residents.

Progress against key actions for 2022-23

7. The following three tables provide a summary of progress against the key actions from the strategy for 2022-23. These focus on the three pillars from the strategy: i) building the right foundations; ii) enabling two-way conversations; and iii) expanding the council’s reach and being inclusive.
8. The consultation and engagement strategy has already started to drive improvements in the council’s consultation and engagement practice. Whilst not all targets have been reached, or their focus has shifted, significant progress has been made across all three pillars of the strategy.

Table 1: Building the right foundations

<p>Embed and develop the use of a new digital consultation and engagement platform ‘Let’s talk Oxfordshire’ across the council</p>	<p>Protocols and best practice standards for Let’s Talk Oxfordshire have been collated into a self-serve tool for all users of the platform. This is accompanied by in-person support and guidance from the consultation and engagement team.</p>
<p>Refresh the council’s best practice consultation and engagement guidance</p>	<p>The council’s consultation and engagement toolkit has been refreshed and updated and now includes best practice guidance on how to effectively include young people, the seldom heard and those who are digitally excluded.</p> <p>This guidance also includes new protocols and workflows for best practice consultation and engagement and a specific briefing on consultation and the law, upholding the council’s commitment to the Gunning Principles.</p> <p>The council’s co-production handbook has also been refreshed and new video content produced to explain co-production to different audiences.</p>

<p>Maximise the value of council professionals to support effective consultation and engagement.</p>	<p>A network of staff with responsibilities for consultation and engagement has been established alongside a Let's Talk Oxfordshire super users group. There is also a thriving co-production network.</p> <p>During 2022-23, teams across communications, strategy and insight have come together to support service areas across the council to deliver strategic consultations and engagement activities, including adult social care, education, public health, transport and waste management.</p>
<p>Offer new training and support opportunities</p>	<p>The council has invested in best practice training from the Consultation Institute, targeting staff in the communications, marketing and engagement service initially.</p> <p>A large number of training sessions have been run on how to use Let's Talk Oxfordshire, led by the consultation and engagement team.</p> <p>During 2022-23 over 70 people have taken part in co-production training.</p>

Table 2: Enabling two-way conversations

Priorities	Actions
<p>Introduce new public engagement opportunities for people to hear from and ask questions of the council's Cabinet.</p>	<p>The council's first set of Oxfordshire Conversations events were trialled between 18 and 21 October. Three online meetings were promoted, with 122 people attending (194 signed up) and nearly 100 questions were submitted in advance. These replaced a fuller programme of in-person and online meetings, which were cancelled as a mark of respect following the death of Her Majesty The Queen.</p>
<p>Introduce a wider set of tools that will facilitate a shift away from a 'transmit' approach to consultation to having a two-way dialogue</p>	<p>We exceed our target of at least 10 per cent of projects on Let's Talk Oxfordshire using at least one of the new engagement tools. The mapping tool, which enables people to drop pins on online maps and post comments, was the most frequently used new tool.</p> <p>On the back of a direct approach from Oxford University the council has explored the use of</p>

	<p>citizens' juries, at arm's length, learning from best practice.</p> <p>During June and July 2022, Oxford University convened a Citizens' Jury called Street Voice to explore issues related to transport, health and climate change in Oxford. The council actively engaged with the jury at different stages, as invited by the university, and Cabinet formally received a report of the jury recommendations and responded to this.</p>
<p>Widen the reach and overall diversity of young people engaged</p>	<p>This has been a key area of focus for 2022-23.</p> <p>The council has delivered two innovative sounding board events for children and young people, which blended hands-on activities and discussion. The first centred on the council's cultural provision for young people and attracted an audience of more vulnerable young people; the second focused on the future of travel and transport. Both events generated very positive feedback from participants.</p> <p>Strong relationships between the consultation and engagement team and colleagues who lead the council's children in care council and targeted youth support service have been fostered and strengthened across the year, with excellent partnership working on the first sounding board.</p> <p>The council has positively engaged schools, partners and the voluntary sector to reach a diverse range of children and young people, including vulnerable children and young people such as young carers and SEND children and young people.</p> <p>Children and young people have been actively supported by the consultation and engagement team to participate in decision-making boards and advisory groups. They have also been supported to fully participate in adult-focused stakeholder summits. The team has also conducted focus groups, depth interviews and surveys with a wide range of young people to support service-area led work.</p>
<p>Support open and transparent decision-making</p>	<p>During 2022-23 we introduced a 'you said, we did' section on Let's Talk Oxfordshire to outline the actions taken by the council in response to</p>

	feedback. Improving the content of this section remains a key focus for 2023/24.
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Table 3: Expanding the council’s reach and being inclusive

Priorities	Actions
Build the council’s online audiences	<p>Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, approximately 188,000 people visited Let’s Talk Oxfordshire, with 11,310 registering their details.</p> <p>Visitor numbers and registrations spiked when the council was consulting and engaging on high-profile issues. Whilst overall registrations did not achieve the ambitious 15,000 target set in the strategy, we recognise that it is not always appropriate to ask people to register to take part in consultations and engagement exercises, particularly on sensitive issues, and this may in fact deter participation.</p> <p>To mitigate against this, we introduced opportunities for people to sign up for news, information and consultation or engagement activities of interest in some consultation and engagement exercises. This has resulted in 4,500 people opting into receive communications from the council, helping to build our online audiences.</p>
Focus on including everyone, by supporting equal access and inclusion in consultation and engagement practice	<p>We now have a standard template for communications and engagement plans. Stakeholder mapping is crucial to understanding audience groups and remains a key area of focus.</p> <p>To address digital exclusion, the communications, marketing and engagement team routinely works with libraries to promote engagement and consultation opportunities. This includes providing posters and hard-copy reference documents (eg maps) where appropriate.</p> <p>We have engaged with councillors and partners – including schools and voluntary and community sector organisations - to provide promotional packs to help make many of our key consultation and engagement exercises more accessible to local people. These packs contain posters for self-printing, content for social media and newsletters etc.</p>

	<p>A weekly digest of consultation and engagement activities has been introduced for the customer services team. This helps them support customer requests for the provision of materials in alternative formats, such as Braille, Easy Read, interpretation or translation services at first point of contact, to signpost more complex queries efficiently, and answer straightforward queries.</p> <p>During 2022-23 we have effectively used partnership networks to make consultation engagement more accessible for target audiences, particularly within adult social care and children's services. This continues to be an area of focus for other parts of the council.</p>
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Key milestones for 2023/24

9. Work continues to further develop the council's consultation and engagement approach and practice. During the 2023/24 we have set the following performance targets:

- Deliver six workshops on consultation and engagement for managers across the council to develop broader and deeper skill sets.
- Routinely update the 'you said, we did' section on Let's Talk Oxfordshire to demonstrate the impact of consultations, being explicit about where feedback has played a part in shaping policy or decision making.
- Deliver two series of Oxfordshire Conversation Q&A events, including a mix of in-person and online sessions.
- Deliver two sounding board events for children and young people to provide deep dive opportunities.

10. Over the course of 2023/34, we will also:

- Champion the best practice use of Let's Talk Oxfordshire across the council, utilising all its tools, and ensuring once again that at least 10 per cent of projects on the platform use at least one of the new engagement tools.
- Continue to build engagement, drive traffic to and increase registrations on Let's Talk Oxfordshire where appropriate. We are aiming for a 10 per cent engaged participants rate per consultation led by or significantly supported by the communications, marketing and engagement team and 15,000 new registrations / sign-ups.

- Introduce a tailored monthly e-newsletter from June 2023 promoting opportunities for consultation and engagement and to provide 'you said we did' feedback on previous consultations.
- Help services to be very clear and open on what it is they are consulting on and what aspect people can influence, so that parameters are clearly understood. We will put a specific focus on ensuring each consultation on Let's talk Oxfordshire includes a brief statement about this in its introduction.
- Trial one of the new methodologies listed in the strategy (eg peer research), according to business need, particularly those that make consultation and engagement more accessible for target audiences, including seldom heard groups and the digitally excluded.
- Continue to improve how we support equal access and inclusion in our consultation and engagement practice and widen the reach and overall diversity of young people engaged.

Financial Implications

11. There are no immediate financial implications arising from this update. The targets for 2023/24 can be met within existing budgets.

Legal Implications

12. This update does not raise any legal implications.

Staff Implications

13. This update does not have any staff implications

Equality & Inclusion Implications

14. This update does not raise any equality and inclusion implications.

Background papers: Consultation and engagement strategy 2022-25

Contact Officer: Kerry Middleton, Head of Communications, Marketing and Engagement.

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