

Agenda Item No: 7

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

[Consultation and Engagement Review – Recommendations Update]

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked:

1. To note the progress made in respect of the recommendations made during the Consultation and Engagement Review.
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Date of O&S meeting: 12 September 2023

Chair of O&S Committee: Cllr. N Bell

Relevant Portfolio(s): Policy and Performance

Summary: The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to form a Task Group to review consultation and engagement as part of the 2022/23 work programme.

A review was undertaken over six months and explored the methods of engagement and communication used at the council as well as the public consultation process in place.

The Task Group made eight recommendations to Cabinet which were approved in November 2022. It was agreed that an update on the recommendations was brought to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee during 2023 to review their progress.

Exempt from Publication: **NO**

Background Papers: Final Report of the Consultation and Engagement Task Group, 24 November 2022

Contact: Abi.sheppard@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233) 330394
Scrutiny and Partnerships Manager

Report Title: Consultation and Engagement Review – Recommendations Update

Introduction and Background

1. During 2022, the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group reviewed the council's approach to consultation and engagement. Members were particularly interested in how the council consulted with residents regarding current issues, new policies and projects. Members also wanted to understand what the challenges were with engaging hard to reach groups and compare best practice with other local authorities.
2. The Task Group made eight recommendations in total which were fully supported by Cabinet in November 2022. As part of the recommendations, it was also agreed that an update would be provided during 2023 to review their progress.
3. Table 1 appended to this report sets out the progress made against the eight recommendations so far and considers the next steps.

Recommendations Update

4. A good level of progress has been made during 2023 so far and many recommendations have been actioned. Due to the ongoing nature of many of the recommendations, a next steps column has been included to inform Members of any planned actions.
5. Notably, the creation of a Citizens' Panel was launched in July. The Panel aims to encourage more consultation responses and wider engagement with residents in the Borough. Once residents register their interest to the Citizens' Panel, they are added to a mailing list of people who are interested in responding to our consultations.
6. An internal consultation group has been set up and is expected to meet in later June 2023. The informal group will be an opportunity for Officers to discuss future consultations and assist services with ensuring surveys are fit for purpose. The finalisation of the consultation guidance will be another way that Officers can undertake consultation effectively. In terms of engagement, work is underway to seek a wider variety of views including those of hard to reach groups in the Borough.

Conclusion

7. This report sets out the progress made in respect of the recommendations made during the scrutiny review of Consultation and Engagement. All

recommendations have been addressed following their approval and work will continue to progress these and support future consultations.

Contact and Email

8. Abi Sheppard, Scrutiny and Partnerships
Manager Abi.sheppard@ashford.gov.uk 01233 330394

Table 1: Progress towards the O&S Consultation and Engagement Review Recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Progress	Next Steps
I	Corporate consultation guidance be produced to provide services with good practice for setting up future consultations. The guidance should include details on the different methods of consultation and set out some minimum standards that need to be complied with before and after a consultation has concluded.	A corporate consultation guidance document is being drafted for internal use by Officers when developing consultations in their service.	The guidance was reviewed by the internal consultation group at its first meeting in June and will become available to Officers shortly on the SmartHub.
II	Non-conventional methods of consultation should continue to be explored by the council in order to increase levels of engagement from residents such as video and Hello Lamppost.	A pilot of Hello Lamppost was undertaken and was able to gather feedback from residents and visitors on various improvements made in the Town Centre. We are about to embark on another exercise, with housing tenants shortly.	Use of video will be explored as part of the Citizens Panel launch. Work to engage with a wider variety of people is planned by working with the Ashford Volunteer Centre to engage with harder to reach groups on our consultations, for example, getting surveys out through the befriending service. Use of face-to-face opportunities such as the Eat Well, Spend Less roadshows are also being utilised.
III	The use of easy-read versions of consultation papers should be considered for all public consultations.	Easy read versions of surveys have been considered so far for all public consultation.	The use of easy read versions will be considered on a case-by-case basis when consultations are reviewed by the internal consultation group.

IV	An internal advisory group should be formed for Officers to review consultations before they are published. The group would meet informally to test and feedback to services about proposed surveys.	The first meeting of the internal consultation group occurred in June 2023. The group includes Officers from Policy and Performance, Housing and the Communications team.	The group will continue to meet quarterly to review the consultation programme for 2023/24 and feedback specifically on surveys and consultations due to be published.
V	A calendar of consultations is produced to ensure that the council can oversee how many consultations are issued to residents during one period.	A calendar of consultations has been developed by the Policy team and approved by the Management Team.	The internal consultation group will review the consultation programme periodically.
VI	Work to increase subscribers to ABC publications should continue to be developed by the Council.	Our e-newsletter subscribers have increased by 40% over the past year. Subscribers March 2020 – 619 March 2023 – 1,019 = 400 sign ups. Strong open rate (between 60-70%) over the last 8 editions. Two thirds of our subscribers read the content. Shows people are finding the content useful/interesting and are reading it/clicking through to the articles on our website. In the e-zine we use one of the feature boxes to promote the latest consultations being undertaken.	As part of the Citizens Panel, we have begun to create a list of subscribers which we can use to contact residents regarding upcoming consultation and consultation outcomes.
VII	The council explore options around creating a Citizens Panel to encourage local residents to give their views and opinions on services and issues that affect the Borough.	An options paper was discussed by the council's Management Team and it was agreed that a Citizens Panel would be set up.	Since its launch in early August, the Citizens' Panel has 104 registered residents. We are now live with the Ashford Mural Project and Events Consultation for Citizens' Panel Members to complete and this is due

		<p>This supported option detailed that the Panel would be managed and maintained by the Policy Team and would work in collaboration with Services who were looking to consult.</p> <p>To help achieve sign up to the Panel, this was launched together with the council's new Customer Portal, 'My Ashford', on 1st August 2023. As people have signed up to the Customer Portal they have been offered the option to also subscribe to the Citizens Panel.</p> <p>The website has been updated to include dedicated Citizens Panel web pages whereby residents can access further information and sign up if they wish.</p>	<p>to close on 5th September 2023. We will then analyse the responses received from the consultation and feedback to services accordingly.</p> <p>The list of people who have subscribed to the Citizens' Panel will be contacted when new consultations are listed and to communicate how their responses are being used to inform our services.</p>
VIII	Residents are engaged with the scrutiny work programme each year using the Council's communications channels.	The scrutiny team has aimed to increase engagement with residents by publishing an article in the Summer edition of the Ashford For You magazine. The article encourages residents to email their ideas for scrutiny topics which will then be considered for the committee work programme.	There are plans to use social media to inform residents of upcoming Committee meetings and encourage attendance by sharing the meeting link for them to join.