Scrutiny Committee

Report of the Deputy Chief Executive – Transformation and Operations

Author: Shona Ware (Communications and Engagement Manager)

Telephone: 07917088345

E-mail: shona.ware@southandvale.gov.uk

Vale Cabinet Member: Cllr Bethia Thomas

Tel: 07906 821680

E-mail: Bethia.thomas@whitehorse.gov.uk

To: Vale Scrutiny Committee

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South Cabinet Member: Cllr Andrea Powell

Tel: 07882 584120

E-mail: Andrea.powell@southoxon.gov.uk

To: South Scrutiny Committee

DATE: 27 June 2022

Public consultations

Recommendation(s)

(a)That members note the review into the councils' public consultation and engagement approaches and provide feedback for consideration to the Cabinet Member for Community Engagement (Vale) Cabinet Member for Corporate Services (South).

Purpose of Report

To share the findings of the review into the councils' public consultations and engagement activities and the recommended next steps.

Strategic Objectives

The findings of the review and the recommended actions will contribute to all corporate priorities but particularly *Working in an open and inclusive way (Vale) and Openness and accountability (South).*

Background

1. South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils are committed to delivering excellent services which meet the needs of the people we serve. We want to listen to residents, businesses and voluntary and community groups through our consultations and engagement. Working with local communities, partners, stakeholders and businesses to build channels for dialogue and engagement is a key part of the councils' plans to enhance the relationship between residents and those who they elect to represent them. Public services that are based on an understanding of the needs of communities are essential, and effective engagement is one way of achieving this.

2. Engagement is a vital part of a modern democracy and councils have both statutory and common law duties to consult the public on a range of issues. It is the way in which residents can influence the delivery of services and the development of policies. Engagement supports, informs and improves decision-making by elected councillors, but it does not replace it; the responsibility for the final decision on any issue that involves the councils' resources rests with the elected members.

3. Over the last two years, extensive face-to-face engagement has not been achievable given the constraints imposed as a result of the Covid pandemic. On the other hand, the experience of the pandemic has shown how the councils could be more creative in their approach to engagement.

4. Consultation and engagement projects have seen a shift from being mainly paper based to moving to a broader range of methods including online using our Smart Survey system which allows us to run online surveys.

5. The Consultation and Engagement Team consists of a recently appointed Consultation and Engagement Lead Officer, a Consultation and Engagement Officer and a Consultation and Engagement Assistant Officer. The team has been without a full-time Lead Officer for over 12 months which has led to some capacity issues.

6. The Consultation and Engagement Officers provide corporate support and advice for all consultation and engagement activities including both statutory and non-statutory consultations.

   - **Statutory consultations** This is where national legislation, regulation and law stipulates that we must take part in consultation or engagement sometimes with specified audiences. These can include when we're updating policies, introducing new ones, or where we're changing fees and charges. For some council services we're required to consult periodically, sometimes as part of a review of processes or policies, even if we're not making changes. Many aspects of Planning Policy under the National Planning Policy Framework require consultation, which falls under this category. Statutory consultations usually require the most amount of time, support and expertise from the

Communications and Engagement Team since they are bound by legal requirements and have strict rules surrounding how they should be conducted. Failure to carry out these activities correctly according to the regulations and according to consultation industry best practice and case law can expose the councils to legal risk.

It's important to note that statutory consultation doesn't necessarily mean a full public survey – it may simply mean notifying the relevant authorities or publishing documentation in a newspaper or on the website. Subject matter experts work with the Communications and Engagement Team and when necessary, the Legal team, to ensure the appropriate requirements are met.

- **Non-statutory consultations and engagement** This covers any other consultation and engagement activity we're not required to carry out. This can include quite high-profile activities – for example, many local authorities carry out non-statutory consultation in the early stages of the development of a Local Plan as it can give the plan a better chance of passing the inspection process. So non-statutory consultation can still carry high risk for the councils and shouldn't be viewed as low-priority or of low importance.

  This category can also include any two-way communication between the councils and their audiences, particularly when we have instigated it. So, it might include a feedback survey to find out what a customer thought of a service we have provided them, or a snap poll on social media to generate a conversation about a topic related to our services.

  While non-statutory consultations and engagements are optional there is an expectation from our communities that we will consult and engage with them on projects that will impact them. It is also considered best practise to collect and record this feedback and by doing so we can be confident that we are meeting our Corporate Plan target of 'engaging effectively with residents, parish and town councils and other community organisations.'

7. Consultation and Engagement Officers are responsible for working with teams to build and develop their consultations and engagements, ensure all consultation guidelines are followed and that engagements are inclusive. Once a consultation has launched, the team continues to support during the period that the survey is live with monitoring responses and when it has closed, they produce consultation reports including detailed analysis of results. The team works across both councils and often statutory consultations have to be carried out by each council independently, which can sometimes double the workload.

8. The function sits within the Communications Team particularly in recognition of the role for comms in raising awareness of the consultation/engagement activity to encourage participation.

9. Communications Officers provide close support to our consultation work in developing extensive communications plans and activities to encourage all audiences and stakeholders to have their say. This can include press releases and

briefings, press interviews with relevant members, targeted social media campaigns including innovative digital media, videos, graphics and web portals, newsletters, and communications via town and parish councils. It also includes physical assets like posters and leaflets in community centres and libraries.

Engagement Methods

10. The online Smart Survey system is the key tool for citizen engagement, particularly for any form of statutory engagement. The system allows us to run online surveys and attach consultation documents. However, it does have limitations in that it does not permit us to upload consultation results and reports, so this takes place on the councils'[websites.

11. The use of the Smart Survey system has increased significantly in the past two years where there has been a higher demand for online engagement as a consequence of the Covid pandemic where face-to-face communications became severely limited. While we are now in a position to restart face to face engagement with all Covid restrictions now lifted, the desire to engage and participate online remains high with many highlighting the convenience of taking part at a time and location that suits them as hugely appealing.

12. Alongside this need to ensure good quality online engagements, we would also like to remain inclusive and recognise some would still prefer a more traditional paper-based method of consultation which the councils have continued to offer although the number of returns using this method are very low, please see table below.

Consultations and Engagements April 2021 to March 2022	Total responses (online and paper)	Online response	Paper Response	Statutory consultation y/n
Appleton with Eaton Neighbourhood Plan	21	21	n/a	Y
Chilton Neighbourhood Plan	15	15	n/a	Y
West Hanney Neighbourhood Plan	9	9	n/a	Y
Joint Local Plan - new ways of working survey	17	17	n/a	N
Feedback on the elections 2021	282	282	n/a	N
Didcot Garden Town residents sounding board: register your interest! (May 2021)	0	n/a	n/a	N
Life choices: questionnaire	102	102	n/a	N
Chelsea's story: questionnaire	471	471	n/a	N
Assurance Team Customer Feedback	12	12	n/a	N

Didcot Gateway office: early ideas feedback	189	189	n/a	N
Councillor survey - Didcot Gateway office: early ideas feedback	12	12	n/a	N
Town and Parish Forum: your feedback	14	14	n/a	N
Cornerstone in Didcot: what next for your arts centre?	624	624	n/a	N
Name the river creatures vote	171	171	n/a	N
Review of Milton Park LDO: sign up to attend engagement event	37	37	n/a	Y
Review of Gambling Policy: Consultation	5	5	n/a	Y
Review of Milton Park LDO: early engagement feedback	122	119	3	Y
Kidmore End Neighbourhood Plan	54	54	n/a	Y
Abbey Meadow outdoor pool: what extra activities would you like?	75	75	n/a	N
South and Vale 'Call for Land and Buildings available for Change' Form	393	393	n/a	Y
Consultation on the draft Joint Statement of Community Involvement	109	109	n/a	Y
Business Recovery Survey - Autumn 2021	80	80	n/a	N
Didcot Gateway office: your thoughts on the concept designs	76	76	n/a	N
Great Big Green Week quiz	24	24	n/a	N
Let's Talk: training evaluation	12	12	n/a	N
#NoLaughingMatter: what do you know about laughing gas?	756	756	n/a	N
Shiplake Neighbourhood Plan - publicity period	48	47	1	Y
Dalton Barracks Strategic Allocation Draft SPD: public consultation	218	218	n/a	Y
Litter Bug Detective Trail: your feedback	18	18	n/a	N

Cyber Security Quiz	54	54	n/a	N
Abingdon Neighbourhood Area Designation	11	11	n/a	Y
Woodcote Neighbourhood Plan	69	66	3	Y
Feel unsafe on a night out? Tell us	347	347	n/a	N
SouthVale Building Control - your feedback	56	56	TBC	N (but the survey is a requirement of their industry accreditation)
Security works to your property: your feedback	1	1	n/a	N
Henley-on-Thames Neighbourhood Plan	29	29	n/a	Y
Sonning Common Neighbourhood Plan	13	13	n/a	Y
Long Wittenham Neighbourhood Plan Review	32	32	n/a	Y
Draft Joint Design Guide: we'd like your feedback	189	189	n/a	Y
Draft Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Charging Schedule: we'd like your feedback	42	41	1	Y
Draft Developer Contributions Supplementary Planning Document (SPD): we'd like your feedback	27	26	1	Y
Kidmore End Neighbourhood Plan - Revised Appendix D7	20	20	n/a	Y
Review of the Henley-on-Thames Conservation Area	8	8	TBC	Y
Community Governance Review South Oxfordshire	2	2	TBC	Y
Community Governance Review Vale of White Horse	6	6	TBC	Y
Review of the Great Coxwell Conservation Area	2	2	TBC	Y

13. Consultations and engagements on Smart Survey do not cover all our work. There is much more engagement that takes place across our Service Areas; informal engagement takes the form of meetings with stakeholders, face-to-face meetings with residents, and feedback to our services. This form of engagement goes beyond the more formal approach of asking for opinions on a particular matter to a way of gathering information through an ongoing dialogue to inform and improve our services. A list of the ongoing feedback surveys can be viewed in the table below.

Ongoing feedback surveys:

Food and Safety Feedback
Community Safety Feedback form
South and Vale 5 Councils Issue Register
Reception desk customer feedback form
Your chance to get involved with Didcot Garden Town!
Environmental Protection Customer Feedback
Private Sector Housing Customer Feedback form
The Great Green Recycling Bin Quiz
New council websites: staff feedback form
New council website: feedback form (South)
New council website: feedback form (Vale)
Legal Services: officer feedback form
Waste and recycling presentations: your feedback

14. The methods of engagement the councils use can be divided into two broad areas: ad hoc engagement methods and regular forums and meetings. The table below shows some of these methods. Often, an engagement project will use a combination of the methods in the table below:

Ad Hoc Engagement methods	Regular Engagement Methods
	Council and Committee meetings – which members of the public are permitted to address
Social Media Channels e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram	Statutory Partnership Boards e.g.,
Focus Groups	Equalities Groups e.g.,
Community Meetings	Stakeholder Meetings e.g.,
Online Surveys	Business Forums e.g.,
Stakeholder meetings with interested groups	Special Interest Groups e.g.,
Posters and Leaflets	Project-specific engagement
Exhibitions	

15. Consultations and engagements are promoted through a range of channels including social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, press releases, public notices, website updates, direct communication to stakeholders and emails to all those registered on the consultation and engagement database.

Engagement participants

16. The types of participants in any engagement exercise vary depending on the topic we're seeking views on. Participants may include the general public, businesses/organisations, our partnerships, parish Councils, community and voluntary sector, councillors, statutory/stakeholder groups, residents' groups and staff.

17. The increased use of quicker digital communications has helped broaden the core consultee base. This has been possible by making consultations more accessible i.e., participation being possible on smartphones and online surveys being available to respond to at any time during the consultation period.

18. Historically we have not routinely gathered data on who is responding to our consultations and have only captured demographic and equalities data (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, disability etc.) within surveys when there has been a clear reason to do so for that particular topic – this was to try and maximise response rates by ensuring surveys were quick and easy and didn't feel too intrusive. However, this makes it impossible to identify which audiences we are successfully reaching and those we aren't, and so we are changing this approach, as outlined in the *next steps* section below.

Consultation and engagement highlights

19. A small number of examples are highlighted below.

South and Vale Corporate Plans 2020-2024
These were good example of effective public engagement in terms of the number of responses received and the use of videos to communicate key messages.
A video of Councillors talking about the Corporate Plan was used to introduce the themes. This video was used on social media and within the online survey. An Easy Read comment form was also available alongside the online survey.
Feedback helped shape councils' priorities and shape projects for the next four years. The use of newer forms of technology helped increase the reach of this consultation and the higher response rates. This clearly showed an appetite for participating in engagement when using appealing methods such as videos.

South Results:
932 survey responses
6,783 video views
27,347 people reached

Vale Results:
773 Survey responses
8,300 video views

34,900 people reached

#NoLaughingMatter campaign October-November 2021
This involved an 18-day campaign being delivered across South and Vale. It targeted 16–34-year-olds and was successful in reaching a large audience to educate them on the misuse of nitrous oxide, encouraging them to report littered cannisters and signposting for further information and support.

Posters with a QR code to the online quiz were put in key locations.
A competition was promoted where respondents that answered the quiz could sign up to be in with the chance of winning a £25 Nando's or Costa voucher.

Results:
756 completed responses were received.
39% (296 responses) were received from 16–34-year-olds.
670 entered our draw for the chance to win a £25 Nando's or Costa voucher.
37,582 users were reached across social media. This reach generated approximately 2,200 clicks (i.e., users who followed the link to the Smart Survey).

Joint Local Plan

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils have come together to work on a new Joint Local Plan which will guide the kinds of new housing and jobs needed and where they should go, informing planning application decisions for the districts.

An **innovative new interactive website** was launched for this consultation.

By navigating interactive maps, a video and images, respondents can explore the issues on their tablet, computer or mobile phone. Alongside this we have also provided a standard document as a **PDF.**

This approach reflects the direction we would like consultation and engagement projects to move in; providing greater online options while still offering an alternative method for those that would prefer a more traditional approach.

This consultation will close on Thursday 23 June 2022. A summary of the results will be available shortly after this date.

Next Steps:

20. The ambition is for South and Vale to be leading organisations for the way in which we conduct our consultation and engagement function. To achieve this, we need to be innovative in our approach and understand the way people are choosing to

receive their information. The internet and smartphone usage has quickly overtaken printed newspapers as the way to receive news

21. According to an Ofcom report in 2021 about news consumption in the UK, 73 per cent of adults use the internet to get their news while 32 per cent use print newspapers. We need to ensure our consultations follow a similar trend otherwise we run the risk of producing information in formats that fail to reach their intended audiences.

22. The biggest barrier preventing us reaching this ambition is the survey software we are currently working with. While it currently allows us to run online surveys, it offers us little more in terms of additional functionality. To achieve our goal, we are looking into moving to an engagement platform that allows us to run interactive consultation and engagement documents, set up discussion forums, offer translations and improved accessibility functions as part of our Customer and IT Transformation programme. By having a platform that allows us to easily upload and view videos, maps, images and other visuals it will make our consultations more appealing and inviting to participate in. The platform can also help when engaging with those who have additional needs such as visual impairments or alternative language requirements.

23. Another key goal is to ensure all our consultations are reaching a broad range of people taking notice of the protected characteristics outlined in the Equality Act, age, gender, race, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity. We will be looking to build on established channels for communicating with these groups and establishing new channels where they do not already exist. We would like to continue the close working relationship with the Equalities Officer to help achieve this goal.

24. We'll shortly be launching a consultation on the forthcoming Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy, and this will help identify where there are gaps in the audiences we're targeting with our consultation and engagement activities, the findings should help us put plans in place to fill those gaps.

25. Expanding the use of social media messaging to reach a wider audience, including a younger audience, will also be key to the success of our consultation and engagement projects. According to an Office for National Statistics report in 2019 on Internet Users in the UK, 99% of 16- to 44-year-olds were internet users. Since the surveys began in 2011, adults aged 75 and over have been the lowest users of the internet. In 2011, 20% were internet users and by 2019 this figure had increased to 47%. However, internet use in the 65 to 74 years age group has increased from 52% in 2011 to 83% in 2019, closing the gap on younger age groups. These figures challenge some long standing views about internet usage being mainly concentrated in younger age groups. For those in the 75 years and over group, it is important to ensure they still have the most appropriate channels available to them so that they can participate. We would like to carry out some research with this group to explore options around their preferred methods of receiving information.

26. To help us increase engagement with audiences we have previously failed to reach or engage with as well as we'd like – particularly younger people and those from minority groups in our districts, so we first need to understand who those audiences are. We will identify these through the work we're doing to produce a new Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.

27. We have now begun routinely generating demographics data from our consultation and engagement activities. This will help us create a baseline data of who we are reaching and, more importantly who we aren't. This baseline data will give us an evidence base for how we can better target our communications and consultations and will also give us solid measures of success for our evolving approach to engagement activities.

28. Most importantly though, it will help ensure wider audiences, including younger people are able to engage with us and influence council policies and services.

Climate and ecological impact implications

29. None.

Financial Implications

30. Any budget required for any of the next steps will be met through existing budget or considered as part of budget setting.

Legal Implications

31. None

Risks

32. None.

Other Implications

33. None

Conclusion

34. The review has highlighted some areas for development in improving the councils' consultation and engagement approaches, which once delivered will help to share the councils' services and policies to meet the needs of its customers. We would therefore welcome members' feedback on the draft.