



To: Civic Affairs Committee  
Report by: Andrew Limb, Head of Corporate Strategy  
Wards affected: All wards affected

## **Findings of the review into public participation in the Council's decision-making**

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### **1. Executive summary**

**1.1** The Member Working Group, set up and guided by the committee to review public involvement in the council's decision-making, found that levels of public participation were generally high and that the council continues to offer a wide range of high quality opportunities for local people to get involved in its decision-making. Whilst improvements to current practice can be made, overall it was found that the consultations carried out by the council were robust and to a good standard, enabling diverse groups of local people to have their say and engage with the council – informing and sharing in decision-making.

**1.2** The Working Group also found that improvements in current practice could be made and asked that awareness be raised about the existing opportunities to get involved and speak at meetings, that further use of social media in both promoting and reporting on meetings be investigated and that additional work is carried out to involve children and young people. Prior to this meeting Executive Councillors whose portfolios were affected by the “suggested” improvements were advised of them and invited to attend and give their views.

### **2. Recommendations**

**2.1** The Committee is recommended to accept the suggestions made by the Working Group, shown in the boxes in this paper, following their review and that Executive Councillors with responsibility for areas where the suggestions fall are asked to take them on board and arrange to move them forward.

### **3. Background**

**3.1** Civic Affairs Committee, when it met on 17 February 2016, agreed to set up a working group to look at public participation in the Council's decision-making, in response to a motion on public engagement considered at Council on 22 October 2015. Members of the working group, drawn from the committee, accepted the terms of reference provided by the committee.

**3.2** The terms of reference set out by the committee to guide the review were:

- i. To identify the current means by which the public engages with councillors and with the formal decision making processes of the Council (meetings of Full Council, scrutiny committees, regulatory committees and area committees and consultations on major policies) and, as far as possible, the resources used for each of those means;
- ii. To assess the impact of the current means of public engagement in decision making;
- iii. To review the costs and perceived impacts of different approaches to public engagement in decision making of comparable councils;
- iv. To report back to Civic Affairs with recommendations in September 2016.

**3.3** The Working Group, guided by its terms of reference, met on four occasions to consider the following aspects of public involvement in the council's decision-making:

- The ways the public can presently get involved in the formal decision-making of the council and become a part of the process and the resources used for each.
- The present engagement techniques utilised, their cost and an assessment of the success of each.
- The level of involvement of the public in our decision-making meetings, the duration of these meetings and the number of decisions taken in them.
- The learning gained from the "North Area Participation Pilot" including what local people thought about our decision-making process, the

initiatives that seemed to work well and some of the characteristics of leading “empowering” council’s at this time (2010).

- How the council currently engages with young people in decision-making meetings, supported by the council’s Children and Young People’s Participation Service.
- The council’s consultation policy and practice, including the council’s consultation code of practice and selected case studies showing how the council consults about complex issues, contested issues, involves stakeholders in the process and listen to divergent views.
- What other local authorities are currently doing to involve local people in their decision-making meetings.
- Feedback from councillors on current methods of public engagement in decision making, gathered through a short survey in late May 2016.

#### **4. Ways the public can presently get involved**

**4.1** The Working Group looked at ways that local people can presently get involved in formal decision-making meetings and found that the council continues to offer a wide range of high quality opportunities, including attending a meeting and asking a question, submitting a petition either online or on paper, taking part in a consultation sponsored by the decision-making body, engaging with a councillor, and becoming part of an advisory or decision-making body that promote engagement. The Working Group reviewed the resources used for each of those means, as far as possible.

**4.2** The Working Group found that generally the council’s public speaking rights worked well but that awareness of them should be raised, including the different standards are applied in different types of committee. The reasons for the different approaches should be more clearly set out and where the Chair has discretion to extend participation for local people attending meetings this should be made known.

**4.3** The Working Group recognised that for some people asking a public question is a fairly daunting prospect and that work should be carried out to make people feel more at ease, perhaps using the website, film clips and /or social media to show what they can expect at a meeting and how they can participate. It was also important that local people became aware of decisions taken at the earliest point practicable.

#### **4.4 The Working Group suggests\* that:**

- i. Public speaking rights at our decision-making meetings are promoted and a video clip prepared showing what people can expect when they attend a meeting to help “de-mystify” what will happen. Scope for Chairs’ discretion to be highlighted and promoted.
- ii. An assessment is made of the process for preparing and releasing minutes, including records of decisions taken, to determine if decisions can be released in a more timely way for more of the Council’s meetings, perhaps following a similar approach to that now taken for planning decisions which are made available the following day.
- iii. The Council continues to encourage local people to give feedback on their experiences of attending council decision-making meetings so that a current overview of attendees’ experience can be gained.

*\*The Leader and Executive member for Strategy and Transformation is responsible for the services that will deliver these suggestions.*

## **5. Present consultation and engagement policy and techniques**

**5.1** The Working Group looked at the range of consultation and engagement techniques that the council presently utilises and found that, on the whole, they enable diverse groups of local people to have their say about and help inform decisions that will be taken in decision-making meetings. These included public speaking at Council and committee meetings, open forums at area committees, user groups, the use of single issue meetings, public led meetings, online surveys, public presentations and displays, deliberative workshops, focus groups, mail shots, telephone surveys and informal conversations.

**5.2** The Working Group considered the council’s approach to consultation shown in its Code of Best Practice on Consultation and Community Engagement and its application in five case studies in varying situations.

**5.3** The Working Group found that the council’s current approach to consultation was robust, having considered the case studies, and whilst not perfect, has been able to incorporate a wide range of voices offering

different opinions in differing circumstances, which has helped inform the council's decision-making.

**5.4** The Working Group found that the council's Code of Best Practice on Consultation and Community Engagement needs to be updated to take into account changes in legislation and other guidance since it was last revised. The Working Group felt that this code of practice is important because it sets out the standards the council expects from consultations carried out on its behalf – so acts as a guide to both officer practitioners conducting consultations and what members of the public being consulted can expect – and should be promoted as a part the council's partnership work with others.

**5.5** The Working Group suggests\* that:

- i. The council's Consultation Code of Practice is updated to ensure it reflects recent changes in legislation and guidance. The Code, including proposed revisions, is shown in Appendix 1.
- ii. Awareness of the council's code of practice is raised with staff across the Council, emphasising that all consultations should be clear and concise and be in proportion to the nature and impact of the proposals.
- iii. The council's approach to consultation is promoted within the partnerships we are involved with to try and ensure high standards of consultation practice are implemented, accepting that we are one of a number of equal partners.

*\*The Leader and Executive member for Strategy and Transformation is responsible for the services that will deliver these suggestions.*

**5.6** The Working Group supported the approach that the technique selected will vary with the potential impact of the decision to be taken, the stakeholders who will need to be involved, the complexity of the issue, the time period over which the decision will be taken and the resources available. Members of the Working Group were clear that engagement should not be carried out for the sake of it and that any consultations should be in proportion to the decision to be taken and include questions in accessible language with minimal jargon.

**5.7 The Working Group suggests\* that:**

- i. The council continues to look at consultation techniques that will include “seldom heard” voices in its major consultations, so that our consultations can be inclusive of a wide range of views.

*\*The Leader and Executive member for Strategy and Transformation is responsible for the services that will deliver these suggestions.*

**6. The level of involvement in decision-making meetings**

**6.1** The Working Group looked at an analysis of just over 160 recent decision-making meetings to assess the level of involvement of local people, based on attendance at each meeting and the number of questions asked. The type of meeting, whether regulatory, scrutiny or area committee, and the issue under consideration influenced interest in the meeting and the nature of the engagement with the public.

**6.2** The Working Group found a high level of public involvement already existed with just over 2,400 public attendances in the decision-making meetings looked at during a two period and that nearly 650 questions were asked and that the level of public involvement appeared to be higher than that of comparable local authorities.

**6.3** The Working Group also found that area committees, especially open forums, were one of the important means of engagement for local people in the council’s decision-making and still attracted the largest numbers of local people to meetings with just over half of all public attendance and four fifths of all questions raised at them. The Working Group also felt that the learning from different areas should continue to be shared, e.g. through Area Committee Chairs’ informal briefings, so that best practice was available, however it was recognised that local members knew their communities and the form of engagement that worked best.

**6.4 The Working Group suggests\* that:**

- i. Best practice continues to be shared between area committee chairs and that regular meetings are offered to discuss community engagement initiatives.

*\*The Leader and Executive member for Strategy and Transformation is responsible for the services that will deliver these suggestions.*

## **7. Learning from previous work promoting participation**

**7.1** The Working Group discussed the learning gained from previous work to promote participation including that from the North Area Committee pilot. During the pilot local people both having attend a council meeting and those who had never come across a council meeting before were asked about what they thought about getting involved in the council's decision-making meetings.

**7.2** The Working Group heard that most people spoken to had said that it was good to know that the opportunity to participate in the council's decision-making meetings was there, if something came up that they wanted to express a view about, but ordinarily they wouldn't want to give up the time to attend a meeting. Those that had attended for the first time felt that meetings should be made to feel more informal and welcoming and that the rules of participation were unclear. Most said that they wanted to have their say when they got to a meeting and didn't want to listen at length to councillors.

**7.3** Local people also said, at this time, that the council's management of agenda should be improved, so people knew what to expect and when - so they can dip in and dip out of meetings depending on what they were interested in, and to ensure that meetings didn't go on too long. They thought that the meetings should be about more than just the people inside the room – engagement with the local communities should take place outside the room so that the committee can take on wider views than those of the people who can get to meetings.

**7.4** Young people said that council decision-making committee meetings weren't for them.

**7.5** The Working Group recognised that meetings were not for everyone and that elected members had a crucial role to play in representing the interests of people outside of the room, bringing their views into meetings. The use of other advocates or other community representatives also had an important role to play in ensuring a wide range of views were represented. Wider consultation and engagement also had its place in ensuring that the voice of groups of people with lower levels of influence or power could be heard.

**7.6** The Working Group agreed that it was usually the issue being considered at a decision-making meeting that was the key driver for increasing public involvement – so selecting the right issue or being flexible enough to respond to demand from local people to discuss an issue will raise participation in decision-making meetings. The Working Group felt that where resources and time permitted a useful vehicle for allowing larger

numbers of local people to get involved is the holding of special interest or public meetings.

**7.7** The Working Group agreed that good chairing of meetings in terms of getting the right balance between people having the opportunity to have their say and concluding business at a reasonable time is important but felt this could be challenging to achieve in practice at times when agendas contain complex items or when there are a large number of public questions.

**7.8** The Working Group wanted to continue to obtain feedback about what local people thought about their experiences at decision-making meetings, to improve future practice.

**7.9** The Working Group suggests\* that:

- iv. Appropriate support continues to be offered to Chairs of decision-making meetings, including suitable training, to ensure the difficult task of balancing public involvement and management of agenda is achieved.

*\*The Leader and Executive member for Strategy and Transformation is responsible for the services that will deliver these suggestions.*

## **8. Involving young people in decision-making meetings**

**8.1** The Working Group heard that one route of engagement with children and young people in the council's decision-making is currently through area committees, and that this is an important element of the work of the Children's Engagement post in the council's Children and Young People's Participation Service (ChYpPS). This post was put in place because it was felt that children and young people required additional support to put forward their views about local issues.

**8.2** ChYpPS has used a variety of techniques to collect the views of children and young people over the past year, including face-to-face conversations, questionnaires and video diaries to enable a wide range of children to be consulted. Feedback has been gathered on a large scale (Cambridge Children's Survey) and through more focused feedback (Agenda Days).

**8.3** The Working Group found that the approach to involving children and young people in its decision-making should be meaningful. The Working Group felt that participation was not solely about the act of expressing an



opinion and having that opinion taken seriously, but of being able to construct an opinion freely through accessing information and talking to others. It was recognised that local schools had a significant role to play and that the council should look at ways of involving local schools in local democracy initiatives, subject to resources and the capacity of local schools to engage, and through Mayoral events and the use of the Council Chamber for debating activity, perhaps associated with School Councils.

**8.4** The Children's Commissioner's Takeover Challenge is an engagement project which sees organisations across England opening their doors to children and young people to take over adult roles. It puts children and young people in decision-making positions and encourages organisations and businesses to hear their views. Children gain an insight into the adult world and organisations benefit from a fresh perspective about their work. This year Takeover Day will be held on 18 November and offers an opportunity for the council to get involved.

**8.5** The Working Group also found that some area committees had learnt to be more flexible in their agenda management to accommodate children and young people that wanted to share their views, so that they were given the opportunity to speak at the very beginning of meetings as part of a dedicated item, in a supportive atmosphere. This way they did not have to sit through other business that was not relevant to them and that they did not face the prospect of interruption by other competing speakers.

**8.6** The Working Group suggests\* that:

- i. Local secondary schools are invited to get involved in council local democracy initiatives, such as "Meet the Mayor" events held in the Council Chamber.
- ii. A project proposal is developed, to give young people an insight into local democracy, and to hear the views of children and young people as part of national "Take Over Day" on 18 November 2016.

*\*The Executive member for Communities is responsible for the services that will deliver these suggestions.*

## **9. What other local authorities are currently doing**

**9.1** The Working Group looked at the approaches taken by eight other local authorities to public involvement in their decision-making meetings. Three of the local authorities, Colchester, Suffolk Coastal and Derbyshire Dales were nominated by the Local Government Association as examples of good community engagement practice.

**9.2** The Working Group found that all offered similar engagement methods for local people in decision-making meetings to Cambridge City council but that their arrangements were shaped by the way the local authorities took their decisions, e.g. from strong Leader to committee arrangements, and the constitutions that supported these.

**9.3** The Working Group found that the LGA nominated local authorities packaged their disparate approaches into community engagement policies or strategies, so that their methods of engagement are shown in one place. These formed a more comprehensive guide incorporating the principles of engagement and how local people can get involved and is an approach the council should look to adopt.

**9.4** The Working Group also felt that the council should explore using its social media channels more to promote public involvement in decision-making meetings and investigate if the “live-streaming” of some meetings can take place, in the context of present ICT infrastructure, officer capacity and other resource constraints.

**9.5** The Working Group suggests\* that:

- i. A web page that brings together the different ways that people can engage with us and have their voice heard, into a single place is prepared.
- ii. The Council explores ways to promote the present Youtube video clip of Full Council meetings and explore the possibility to “embed” the video clip for each meeting alongside the minutes within the Modern Gov. pages.
- iii. Explore the viability of “live-streaming” video of Full Council meetings and to trial this if it can be achieved with the constraints of our current set up, AV provision, other technical constraints and officer capacity.
- iv. Investigate the potential for upgrading the present audio-visual system in the Council Chamber and to provide an assessment of the costs and benefits of upgrade options.
- v. Look at ways that our social media channels could be used to better promote public involvement in our decision-making meetings.

*\*The Leader and Executive member for Strategy and Transformation is responsible for the services that will deliver these suggestions.*

## **10. Feedback from councillors on current methods of public engagement**

**10.1** The Working Group noted the findings of an online survey of council members, conducted in early June, who were asked to give their views about the council's current methods of engagement, what aspects of this could be improved and to highlight any examples of good practice they were aware of. Ten council members took part in the survey.

**10.2** The Working Group heard that the council members who participated in the survey felt that area committee community forums were the most effective ways for local people to get their voice heard and that special interest meetings offered a more focussed opportunity to get involved.

## **11. Implications**

### **(a) Financial Implications**

The "suggestions" of the Working Group can be accommodated within existing resources. Where additional resources may be required following an investigation into the feasibility of taking a proposal forward, such as an improved audio-visual system for the Council Chamber, the Executive Councillor with responsibility for the area will be asked to give approval through the usual budget-setting and capital processes.

### **(b) Staffing Implications**

Members and officers may be required to amend some of their present consultation and working practices to accommodate the findings from this review.

### **(c) Equality and Poverty Implications**

It is important that voices from all sections of Cambridge's population, including those that are seldom heard, can be brought into the council's decision-making meetings and form a part of its consultations to help inform and shape the council's work. Seeking the views of people with protected characteristics is integral to the preparation of an EqIA. Good stakeholder analysis at the start of a consultation, including identifying the views of people with a high interest but low influence, will contribute to the preparation of an EqIA.

### **(d) Environmental Implications**

There are no environmental implications arising from this paper.

### **(e) Procurement**

There are no procurement implications arising from this paper.

(f) **Consultation and communication**

This paper reviews the council's consultation code of practice. The findings of the review and actions that arise will include the communication of findings to officers involved in managing consultations.

(g) **Community Safety**

There no community safety implications arising from this paper.

## **12. Background papers**

These background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

Report to Civic Affairs Committee on 17/02/16, Terms of Reference for Review of Democratic Involvement

Reports provided to the Member Working Group at its meetings on: 20/04/16, 6/06/16, 17/06/16 and 19/07/16.

## **6. Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Code of Best Practice on Consultation & Community Engagement showing suggested amendments.

## **7. Inspection of papers**

To inspect the background papers or if you have a query on the report please contact:

Author's Name:	Graham Saint
Author's Phone Number:	01223 457044
Author's Email:	Graham.Saint@cambridge.gov.uk