

## REPORT TITLE: Community engagement and democratic involvement

**To:** Services, Climate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

**Report by:**

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<b>1.</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
1.	<p>It is for Scrutiny to discuss and provide recommendations in response to the proposed approaches in:</p> <p>1) Adopting a new approach to local engagement and democratic involvement; facilitating active participation in decision making at a neighbourhood level as well as a focus on key non-geographical communities.</p> <p>2) Prototype participatory budgeting mechanisms where localised budgets and small funding is available at a neighbourhood level.</p>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Purpose and reason for the report</b>
2.	<p>To align with the council's vision, where <i>Democratic accountability is genuine and accessible</i>, an updated model of local engagement and democratic involvement has been developing and piloted. This report outlines the emerging model for engagement and democratic involvement following the pause and then stopping of Area Committees and following learning developed from a number of engagement pilots that have taken place throughout 2024-25.</p> <p>The model draws from previous recommendations made by The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny in 2022, New Local's report on 'Democratic Engagement in Cambridge' in 2024, and the report to Civic Affairs in July 2024 that set out the basis of an approach based on New Local's recommendations.</p>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Alternative options considered</b>
	A) <u>Improve and re-instate Area Committees</u> : Re-instating Area Committees would go

	<p>against already supported reports and reviews; this does not bring us the widened engagement and democratic involvement we seek. It does not align with the Council's vision.</p> <p>B) <u>Focus on improving and increasing use of online engagement tools</u>: Online engagement proved popular during the pandemic, and systems have been updated to enable hybrid options where possible. Online platforms can be a successful mechanism to engage certain cohorts, however, other cohorts are left behind where digital exclusion and language barriers exist. Moreover, online engagement can often lead to binary options rather than allow for the broad conversational pieces that build consensus, understanding and community power. Online engagement should be '<i>as well as</i>', not '<i>instead of</i>' face to face engagement.</p> <p>C) <u>Develop a structured model that is the same in every ward</u>: We know our wards have very different needs, unique characteristics, assets and strengths. Where possible, the council should seek to enable communities to take the lead, where they have structures in place and capacity to do so. This aids the building of social capital and is in line with our Community Wealth Building approach. Some areas of the City and some communities will require more officer time and support than others in order to create engagement opportunities, for example with seldom heard communities. A flexible approach allows for officers and Members to respond to neighbourhoods and non-geographical communities in ways that will meet their needs and interests and be responsive if required. This also allows greater resources to be focused in areas of high need.</p>
4.	<p><b>Background and key issues</b></p> <p>The principles developed will support an approach to promote Community Wealth Building. In working differently to engage and involve residents and tenants across the City, we seek to develop social capital and community power as part of this.</p>
4.1	<p><b>Background and historical context</b></p> <p><u>Community Wealth Building Strategy</u></p>

The proposed model for democratic engagement supports ambitions of the Community Wealth Building Strategy, especially by:

- creating opportunities for communities to develop their own solutions to the issues they face
- looking at how our money, staff and connections can strengthen the city's local communities

It does so by promoting community power and strengthening social capital.

#### *Review of Area Committees and approach to local engagement arrangements*

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny review in 2022 found widespread support that “Area Committees need a complete overhaul – that they are no longer fit for purpose...Area Committees should integrate better with existing community engagement activities and the Council should give consideration as to whether they need to be formal committees.” In October 2023, the GRG reiterated the need for change from Area Committees as they had lost direction and purpose, were poorly attended, and did not make good use of officer or councillor time and resources. The desire to hear from communities more effectively, and to hear different voices, was a key theme for Members.

New Local was commissioned to identify alternative options for local democratic arrangements. They interviewed a number of City Councillors and a number of officers and community representatives. New Local also reviewed approaches to local democratic engagement in other councils.

New Local's report on democratic engagement reported back to the governance reference group in March 2023. It reiterated that “*While the importance of visible opportunities for councillors to meet with residents and play an active role in the community was strongly reaffirmed, there was wide agreement that the format [of Area Committees] was not working effectively.*” It recommended that the focus going forward should be on hearing resident voices through a variety of means

that make it as easy as possible for residents to engage by building on existing successful structures.

New Local identified that a number of local authorities are also modernising their engagement techniques in an attempt to widen participation and build trust between decision-makers and local communities.

In response to New Local's recommendations, the report to Civic Affairs in July 2024 recommended that Area Committees be paused for the remainder of the municipal year, 2024/25, while pilot work on alternatives continue and while more detailed proposals are developed for implementation, which are set out in this report.

Following the governance review that was implemented in May 2025, Area Committees no longer form a part of the constitution and as such, the Councils governance structure.

#### *External Drivers for change*

There are a number of wider, external drivers to widening and modernising our approach to engagement and involvement with newly emerging opportunities. Criteria published in the government's devolution white paper highlights the need for councils to "*enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.*" The NHS 10 year plan and neighbourhood health guidelines also point to closer working with local government, connecting people to health, care and services within their local neighbourhoods and taking a place-based approach. Furthermore, the structural considerations following devolution will inevitably establish different structures for engagement and will require flexibility in how we achieve this.

#### *Building on existing structures*

In relation to engagement with our council housing tenants, part of the new measures instated by the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 requires us to demonstrate we have sought out and considered ways to improve resident

involvement and tailored engagement for local circumstances. There are a number of existing structures for tenant and leaseholder engagement across the council and the plan is to build on these. Tenant and leaseholder forums, resident involvement publications and initiatives such as our Resident Inspector scheme ensure we are meeting our statutory duty as a landlord, providing regular contact points for tenants and leaseholders as well as building relationships within our estates.

Community forums in areas of strategic growth play an important role in bringing together communities, developers, officers and members for consultations, open dialog and building consensus. They will continue to play an important role as the city continues to expand.

There are wider existing structures outside the council that are also important avenues for engagement such as the police forums and PCN patient voice forums, providing opportunities for residents and Members to influence local priorities across the public sector.

#### Areas of influence

The approach creates flexible and relevant opportunities for residents and Councillors to take ownership and influence decisions. Examples include:

- Structured input into the use of Section 106 contributions to support local investment priorities, ensuring that spending reflects the needs of growing and changing neighborhoods. This could include further engagement following work on the implementation of a CIL, which is already in place in Peterborough, Huntingdonshire and East Cambridgeshire.
- Existing statutory powers such as Assets of Community Value (ACVs), and emerging responsibilities under Community Right to Buy, which provide a route for communities to protect and steward valued local assets.
- Emerging funding opportunities such put communities at the heart of decision making on setting local priorities and developing cases for investment

- Resident, stakeholder and community leader involvement in shaping council services and priorities, including matters such as antisocial behaviour, environmental improvements, and community safety.
- Tenant involvement in shaping housing services.
- Input into planning and development processes, with greater emphasis on involving communities earlier in the process to shape proposals and mitigate impact. For example, through the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Youth Engagement Service.
- Participatory budgeting trials, enabling local people to help allocate small capital or community funding in a transparent, inclusive way.

#### *New approach based on 5 core principles*

Throughout 2023-24, pilots have been running to explore ways to engage our communities in things that matter to them and a new set of principles have been established. These principles align to the council's vision of being more accessible and accountable to the communities we serve.

1. Take a "mixed methods approach" to member-resident engagement, focusing resources on functions that are currently missing, ones where we will have a higher impact or where we have higher concentration of Council activity. The development of this mixed methods approach was a direct recommendation of New Local in 2023.
2. Move away from traditional structures to more flexible activities distributed across different levels of council working, that build on existing community-led structures and activities wherever possible, and support community-led activities proactively.
3. Increase and better signpost opportunities for residents to meaningfully influence decision-making, noting successful examples like the Tenant and Leaseholder Reps and structures for engagement already in place.
4. Explore participatory budgeting and wider involvement in funding, given resident interest, tangible impact, and a clear link to the principle of resident-voice.

4.4	<p>5. Ensure new arrangements align with the Council’s wider ambitions around community power, community wealth building, and revised governance arrangements.</p> <p><u><i>The approach includes 4 types of engagement:</i></u></p> <p>I.<b>Develop Cambridge Conversations</b>; bringing a universal, listening approach across all wards, building on the success of the Leader of the Council conversations and bringing together communities, anchor organisations and council services and members.</p> <p>II.<b>Adopt the Shaping Neighbourhoods approach</b>; an in-depth engagement approach where there is proposed significant change, investment or growth, enabling communities and decision makers across a range of stakeholders to work closer together earlier on than traditional engagement methods.</p>
4.5	<p>III.We will use an evidence-led and inclusive practice to <b>facilitate conversations with communities whose voices are seldom heard</b> within neighbourhoods and across the city. Communities of identity and/or those that experience greater disadvantages require more nuanced and bespoke engagement approaches in order to enable participation and involvement. Where we do not already have a trusted relationship with communities of identity, experience or need, we will work with VCS, trusted community leaders and advocates to help us build trust and engagement.</p> <p>IV.<b>Provide appropriate tools, data and insights for members and officers</b>; better enabling members and staff to be active community champions. This will include greater involvement in participatory budgeting, exploring technology to capture feedback from case work, and training and coaching on engagement skills to create engagement with constituents on a wider range of topics of importance to them.</p> <p><b>Wider Local Authority examples</b></p>

4.6	Authority	Practice	Relevance to Cambridge
	Oxford	<i>Quadrant-based model</i> with locality teams, councillor ward budgets, and cross-cutting themes like inequality	Demonstrates how flexible, officer-supported structures can align members with local priorities without fixed Area Committees
	Test Valley	<i>Community Councillor model</i> backed by rolling officer-led meetings, supported by training and bespoke engagement when needed	Shows the value of embedding engagement into councillor identity, not events
	Barking & Dagenham	<i>Citizen Alliance Network</i> and <i>Participatory NCIL Grantmaking</i> with councillor facilitation	Illustrates participatory budgeting and ward-level engagement being embedded in routine community life
	Worthing	<i>The Big Listen</i> town-wide drop-ins with informal deckchair-based chats; councillors part of team presence	Reframes democratic engagement as relational and non-hierarchical
	Bolton	<i>Community Alliances</i> replacing formal Area Forums; informal networks facilitated by officers	Highlights how moving away from formality can increase participation and agility
<p><b>Approach</b></p> <p>Appendix 1 looks to set out a potential approach to how officers, Councillors and the public can expect to engage with the approach.</p>			
6.	<b>Council Vision</b>		
	<p>This approach directly enhances and responds to the Council's vision of ensuring that <i>democratic accountability is genuine and accessible</i> by embedding a more dynamic, responsive, and inclusive model of community engagement. Moving beyond fixed structures, the model offers councillors clear and practical routes to connect with residents in ways that reflect the diversity of Cambridge's communities, issues, and opportunities. By introducing trigger points and a portfolio of engagement methods including Cambridge Conversations, Shaping Neighbourhoods, and participatory budgeting the Council is enabling greater community voice, strengthening local relationships, and supporting the development of community power. This approach complements the Council's commitments to <i>community wealth building</i>, <i>social capital</i>, and <i>neighbourhood-based working</i>, and ensures that both councillors and residents are better able to influence</p>		



	decisions that affect their lives.
<b>7.</b>	<b>Consultation, engagement and communication</b>
	<p>Detailed interviews took place with a selection of members, officers, regular attendees and community organisations as part of the New Local report.</p> <p>Interviews with VCS partners through the work of building community power research and developing the new equalities objectives have sense-checked and tested the approach.</p> <p>Engagement took place with anchor organisations and key strategic VCS partners through the Leaders conversation event in November 2024.</p> <p>Pilots of the Shaping Abbey, Shaping Coleridge and the engagement as part of the North Cambridge Framework have provided a useful test bed for engaging directly with residents in a variety of communities to help inform new models of engagement.</p> <p>Pilot of Youth Assembly has demonstrated a new partnership led approach in engaging a community who often are not engaged in political life or within their local communities.</p>
<b>7.</b>	<b>Anticipated outcomes, benefits or impact</b>
	<p>Following the implementation of the proposals, we will be better able to evidence the council's impact on residents by increasing opportunities for communities to provide feedback on our impact. There will likely be wider benefits relating to the promoting of community power, especially from perspective that this intends to increase social capital and therefore resilience of communities.</p> <p>Through <b>Shaping Abbey</b>, we've seen sustained and improved engagement, a reduction in concerns raised and positive discussions taking place about local leadership and belonging. Small troubleshooting alongside colleagues in health and the police take place with ease and relationships across public sector organisations has improved.</p> <p><b>Youth assembly pilot.</b> A pilot testing engagement model with a seldom heard group who are often under-represented and missing from engagement. 16 education institutions were engaged. 75 young leaders were trained and supported. 400 conversations were captured. 4 x action working groups have been established to ensure that action carries on beyond the assembly itself.</p>

	New impact measurements will be established through the new group re-design as teams become more familiar with impact measurement compared to output measurement.
<b>9.</b>	<b>Appendices</b>
9.1	Appendix 1: Approach to delivering the framework Appendix 2: New Local Report