

FORMER FINANCE AND CORPORATE SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE: A REVIEW INTO THE COUNCIL'S CONSULTATION ARRANGEMENTS

Cabinet Member	Councillor Douglas Mills
Cabinet Portfolio	Cabinet Member for Corporate Services
Officer Contact	Marion Finney, Central Services Directorate Anisha Teji, Central Services Directorate
Papers with report	Appendix – Data Slides

HEADLINES

Summary	Cabinet is asked to consider the findings, conclusions and recommendations made by the former Finance and Corporate Services Select Committee after its review into the Council's Consultation Arrangements.
Putting our Residents First	This report supports the Council's objective of: <i>An efficient, well-run, digital-enabled council working with partners to deliver services to improve the lives of all our residents</i> This report supports our commitments to residents of: <i>A Digital-Enabled, Modern, Well-Run Council</i>
Financial Cost	There are no direct cost implications resulting from this report.
Relevant Select Committee	Corporate Resources & Infrastructure Select Committee
Ward(s) affected	None

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Cabinet welcomes the insights, findings and conclusions of the Committee and notes this review was highlighted in the Select Committee annual scrutiny report. The Cabinet asks Officers, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, to:

1. Explore the integration of digital devices in libraries, providing users with language preferences for live consultations.
2. Provide quick survey options during detailed consultations for users who prefer faster responses.
3. Consider adding a dedicated section within 'My Account' for live consultation documents to enhance user participation.

4. Foster collaboration with the Youth Council to ensure relevant involvement in consultations, encouraging feedback from the youth demographic.
5. Consider ways to increase engagement on social media platforms, like Facebook, such as addressing comments about consultations and guiding users to relevant consultations.
6. Facilitate easier interaction for Councillors by providing shareable links to consultations within their wards or wider related issues.
7. Establish a 'You said, we did' approach to provide feedback on decisions made and actions taken based on received feedback.
8. Approve using post-meeting links to Council surveys and consultations on relevant council meeting YouTube broadcasts to further promote them.
9. Consider introducing an annual evaluation across consultations looking at their effectiveness in achieving geographical and demographical parity to set measurable objectives for improvement.

Reasons for recommendations

Following a request from the Full Council to review the Council's consultation arrangements, the Committee undertook a short review on the matter in conjunction with the Council's consultation team and using other analysis and best practice information. The Committee has made some practical recommendations to aid the way consultations are devised going forward to increase resident and community interest and take-up, by making them more engaging and dynamic. Ultimately the '**voice of residents**' help to shape the way services are delivered to meet residents needs and for better service delivery and resident experience. The Full Council was updated on the review at its meeting on 9 May 2024, through the Annual Scrutiny Report. The review was finalised under the auspices of the former Finance & Corporate Services Select Committee, which has since been superseded by the Corporate Resources & Infrastructure Select Committee.

Alternative options considered / risk management

Cabinet could choose to not approve or amend any of the recommendations.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Background

At the Council meeting held on 28 September 2023, a motion, as amended, was agreed as follows:

"That this Council regrets a low response rate to its public consultations and asks the Corporate Services select committee to review the Council's consultation process to ensure the voices of our diverse communities are heard, working towards geographical parity."

On 19 October 2023, the Committee had a kick start meeting with the Council's Community Engagement Manager who provided an overview of the Council's consultation process focusing on how the Council engaged with diverse communities and ensured geographical parity. Members expressed a number of points about low response rates and a lack of diverse voices in more universal borough-wide consultations, such as those related to the Budget, SEND Strategy and Library Strategy. The Committee supported a single meeting review on this at a subsequent meeting to enable it to explore the matter further and consider geographical parity and demographic analysis of the Council's consultations in more depth.

The Committee's review

The Committee embarked on its single meeting review on 11 January 2024 where it considered aspects of the consultation process and the key data and consultation response analyses. The Committee was able to question and solicit evidence from the Community Engagement Manager.

The Terms of Reference for the review were agreed as follows:

1. To investigate the Council's Consultation Arrangements as requested by the motion (initial discussion at Select Committee in October).
2. To review how the voice of our diverse communities are heard working together towards geographical parity.
3. To make any necessary recommendations to Cabinet based on the Committee's findings.

Purpose of consultations

Members understood that consultations were activities that gave local people a voice and an opportunity to influence important decisions. It involved listening and learning from local people before decisions were made or priorities were set. Resident surveys fell under the heading of consultations, but the term was usually applied when considering formal or detailed pieces of work such as finding out what residents thought about significant changes or proposals that affected them, such as plans to change services, regenerate or redevelop a local area, or on particular planning applications.

The Committee heard about the different types of consultations including Statutory vs Non – Statutory and their significance. Some issues, such as planning or redevelopments, required Councils to consult their residents by law. These statutory consultations followed legal requirements and had strict rules on how they should be conducted. Other consultations had no legal status but served various purposes such as improving policies, providing consent, encouraging participation and aligning activities with resident needs and aspirations and the delivery of the Council Strategy.

Geographical and demographic parity

The Committee was informed that geographical parity referred to ensuring that residents from all geographic areas within the Borough had equal opportunities to participate in consultations and have their voices heard. This, along with demographic parity, e.g. gender, also aimed to avoid any bias or disproportionate representation. In the context of the Council's consultation arrangements at the present time, Members learnt that achieving such parity involved:

1. *Equitable Representation*: Ensuring that residents from different neighbourhoods, wards, or districts were equally engaged in consultations. This prevents over-reliance on feedback from specific areas while neglecting others.
2. *Balancing Response Rates*: Analysing response rates across various geographical areas. If certain areas consistently had lower participation, efforts should be made to encourage engagement from those communities.
3. *Tailored Approaches*: Recognising that different neighbourhoods may have unique needs, concerns, and preferences. Consultation methods should be adapted to suit the characteristics of each area.
4. *Inclusivity*: Making sure that residents from all walks of life, regardless of where they live, their sex or age, had equal access to information about consultations. This includes considering language barriers, accessibility, and digital literacy.

Consultation methods

The Committee was informed that the Customer Engagement Team (CET) was in the main responsible for coordinating consultations and engagement activities across the Council. The team organises events for residents and partner organisations, including conferences, forums, and assemblies.

Members were advised about the different opportunities for residents to engage in a variety of ways, via the use of digital tools as well as 'in-person' contact. Members understood the need for engagement to be non-exclusionary, and not be limited to only digital means but instead provide a breadth of options to give a voice to all residents.

The Committee acknowledged the different methods of consultations used by the Council at the current time including:

- Face to face meetings
- Virtual meetings / discussions
- Surveys (online and paper-based, telephone / postal methods)
- Hybrid sessions
- Information shared on noticeboards
- Social media comments / feedback
- Estate-based events
- Regular engagement with community and faith leaders
- Regular engagement with residents' associations, tenant groups etc.
- Assemblies (e.g. older people)
- Forums (e.g., carers, young people etc.)

It was confirmed that all the above methods were supported with interpretation and translation services where these were required, addressing any potential language barriers to resident engagement. Members noted that the Council also had a database of residents with relevant focus or special interests in various service areas. Some of these residents had also indicated

their preferred method of engagement. The Committee welcomed that the CET was always looking at opportunities to improve its service delivery and add value to its consultation process.

The Committee sought to focus on the wider service consultations by the Council that reach out to a far larger numbers of residents, rather than resident direct democratic engagement such as through voting, petition hearings and speaking at planning committees, which are enshrined within the Council’s governance arrangements.

Consultation planning

Members sought to focus on the process for planning non-statutory larger public consultations, where there was some more scope for the Council to plan its own approach. The different stages were outlined below:

<i>Information gathering</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What exactly do we need to know? • What questions do we need to ask? • Is the information already available elsewhere? • How will the feedback from responses be used?
<i>Target audience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who do we need to engage with? • How will they be reached? • Will residents require assistance to participate? Accessibility, language barrier, specific days, and times etc.
<i>Engagement methods</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which method of engagement is the most suitable for the target audience? • Are there any possible alternatives to the preferred method? • If a survey or consultation – what is the appropriate timeframe? • What are the financial resources available?
<i>Analysis and reporting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will information be collated? • What will be the best way to report the findings? Depending on the audience, e.g., Cabinet, residents, staff etc.
<i>Feedback</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What will be done with the feedback/information received? • How will we demonstrate to stakeholders that we have listened to feedback and where appropriate, acted on it? • Where necessary, how will information received be kept in line with GDPR guidelines?

The Committee was pleased to hear that the CET worked alongside the Communications Team and Digital Team, along with any relevant service areas, to ensure that surveys and consultations were carefully planned and then promoted through various communications channels to residents.

Analysis of consultations

The Committee’s review was supported by data collated from recent consultations to identify any potential engagement trends.

The Committee explored various charts and graphs, including those as evidenced in the Appendix, which provided further insight into resident ethnicity, religion, disability and age. The document provided demographic data and consultation responses for various topics in the boroughs of Hillingdon, Harrow, Brent, Ealing, and Hounslow.

Members were told that it was important to understand Hillingdon's demographic data from the census before delving into specific engagement trends. It was reported that the total population of Hillingdon was 305,900, with a focus on the 18-plus age group, constituting 76.7% of the population. Key demographic breakdowns included ethnicity (51.8% white, 32% Asian), 14% registered disabled, gender (51.2% female, 48.8% male), and religion (41.4% Christian, 19.4% prefer not to say or no religion, 12.1% Muslim). The Committee was informed that 18 + year old residents were more likely to complete surveys and engage with the Council.

Three examples of community consultations were analysed in relation to the Library Strategy, the Council's budget and the recent (Ultra Low Emission Zone) ULEZ consultation. In terms of the Council's budget consultation, there had been a significant increase in responses from 33 in 2021 to 611 in the last year and this was attributed to enhanced engagement efforts. Male respondents consistently dominated, and specific postcodes like UB8, UB10, UB7, and UB3 showed higher engagement. The age range of 35 to 54 recorded the highest response rates, with an interesting uptick in responses from 35 to 44 in the last year. With regard to the Library Strategy consultation, there were 865 responses. 76% of respondents were female and 74% were White. Also 74% were from areas in the North of the Borough. These results vary somewhat from the Borough-wide demographic breakdown outlined above.

In relation to the ULEZ consultation, it was noted that the majority (84.04%) of respondents identified themselves as residents, whilst a smaller percentage represented local businesses (2.35%), community or voluntary groups (0.66%), or individuals who worked or studied in the Borough (6.59%). A small percentage (2.95%) responded on behalf of a local resident. When asked if their vehicle was ULEZ compliant, 45.08% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating that their vehicle met the emission standards required to enter the ULEZ. On the other hand, 54.51% answered "No," indicating that their vehicle did not meet the emission standards.

Regarding the vehicle scrappage scheme, the majority of respondents (92.20%) stated that they were not eligible for the scheme. Only a small percentage (7.80%) indicated that they would be changing their vehicle before the specified deadline. When asked if they would be applying for a vehicle replacement grant, 85.52% of respondents answered "No," indicating that they would not be applying for the grant. A smaller percentage (4.96%) answered "Yes," indicating that they would be applying for the grant. Additionally, 9.52% of respondents answered "Maybe," suggesting that they were uncertain about whether or not they would apply for the grant.

The Committee was also provided with an analysis of data comparisons with neighbouring boroughs of Harrow and Brent and it was revealed that Hillingdon had higher response rates.

Challenges and barriers

The Committee sought clarification on the different challenges and barriers both residents and Council officers had encountered when conducting consultations. Some of the challenges included residents having a lack of trust in the process, lack of awareness of ongoing consultations, lack of time, digital exclusion and communication barriers.

Although officers had implemented several diverse initiatives and platforms had been put into place such as offering translation surveys, engaging with community leaders and different methods of communication both digitally and in person, the response to consultations was ultimately dependent on peoples' awareness and interest.

Conclusions

The Committee believes that consultation is a core process of the Council that allows local people to have a voice and influence important decisions. The Committee concluded that the Council needs to have a very clear understanding of the target audience for any consultation and the challenges in engaging various communities across the geographical spread of the Borough.

The Committee has found that broadly, the Council makes a strong effort to ensure it engages with those hard-to-reach or hidden communities as part of consultations to gain a fair representation and response and thereby seek to achieve geographical and demographic parity. Members commended officers for their collaborative work with neighbouring boroughs and the ongoing efforts to understand and engage with various groups.

Examples given of this included tailoring certain consultations, engaging with community leaders, both face-to-face and digital methods and in some cases offering translation services. Additionally, there was no recurring evidence to suggest the Council's response rates to consultations was lower to neighbouring local authorities, in fact the opposite in one example.

However, the Committee concluded that ultimately any response to consultations was largely dependent on peoples' own awareness and furthermore interest in the topic, so further efforts by the Council should also be focussed on how we promote and stimulate such interest.

Recommendations

To this endeavour, the Committee has proposed some practical recommendations to foster a more inclusive, responsive and effective approach to consultations, using methods that are more interesting, engaging, adaptable and dynamic. They are designed to suit both local and universal consultations, and meet the changing needs of communities and embrace the Council's wider digital strategies:

- 1) **Integration with digital devices:** This aims to make live consultations more accessible and inclusive by accommodating users' language preferences on Council computers and other devices in libraries for responses.
- 2) **'Quick survey' option:** Recognising that some users prefer faster interactions, this feature will enable us to gather valuable feedback without demanding too much of their time, whilst still providing for more fuller responses for those who have time.
- 3) **Dedicated section within 'My Account':** By making consultation documents readily available in residents' online account with the Council, this aims to encourage greater user participation and engagement.
- 4) **Collaboration with the Youth Council:** To further ensure that the perspectives of our younger demographic are adequately represented in our consultations, by ensuring they are consulted by default on universal consultations, along with any specific matters impacting young people.

- 5) **Increased social media engagement:** By actively addressing comments about consultations and guiding users to relevant consultations on platforms like Facebook, this recommendation aims to reach a wider audience and foster greater community involvement.
- 6) **Shareable consultation links for Councillors:** The role of Ward Councillors is vital in bridging the link between residents and the Council. This feature will enable Councillors to easily engage with consultations relevant to their wards, sharing details to their own resident contacts and groups in their wards, promoting a more informed and collaborative decision-making processes. In local consultations Councillors who were familiar with residents in the area may be helpful in identifying effective engagement methods.
- 7) **'You said, we did' approach:** By standardising such an approach to all our consultations, this aims to provide greater transparency and demonstrate how user feedback directly influences Council decisions and actions.
- 8) **Democratic Services broadcasts:** There are options within YouTube to add links to Council meeting broadcasts to sign-post residents when watching to relevant webpages and other links, which could be used to promote key consultations taking place on topics raised during Council meetings and help increase take-up via this popular digital channel.
- 9) **Annual evaluations:** To set measurable objectives for improvement an annual evaluation will be conducted with specific focus on the use of guidelines provided to help service areas achieve maximum engagement on surveys carried out. This will be done within allocated budget.

The Committee believe that these practical recommendations would have minimal resource implications and could be met within existing budgets.

Officer comments on implementing the recommendations

Should Cabinet approve the recommendations, then the Customer Engagement Team will work with other service leads to ensure that the recommendations made are implemented, monitored and reviewed to aid overall resident engagement, service improvement and delivery. The aim is to embed resident engagement and involvement as a golden thread that runs through everything we do as an organisation.

Evaluation will be conducted with specific focus on the use of guidelines provided to help service areas achieve maximum engagement on surveys and activities conducted. This will be carried out within allocated budget.

Democratic Services can sign-post viewers of Council meetings to key live Council consultations discussed at Cabinet/committee meetings by adding in-video links and in the description.

Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications associated with the recommendations contained in this report.

RESIDENT BENEFIT & CONSULTATION

The benefit or impact upon Hillingdon residents, service users and communities

The recommendations in this report are designed with the purpose of improving the Council's consultation process for residents. Hearing, physical and learning disability factors all need to be considered when devising consultations.

Consultation Carried Out or Required

Witness testimony from the Committee as outlined in this report.

CORPORATE CONSIDERATIONS

Corporate Finance

Corporate Finance has reviewed the report and concurs with the financial implications set out above, that there are no direct financial implications associated with the recommendations in this report. The Council increased the Corporate Innovation & Technology approved capital programme budget in February 2023, meaning the Council is in a strong position should any further investment in the digital strategy be required to fund any solutions that may follow on from the recommendations in this report.

Legal

The Borough Solicitor confirms that the legal implications are included in the body of the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

[Committee minutes – 11 January 2024](#)