

Establishing a Runnymede Citizens' Panel (Housing, Andy Vincent)

Synopsis of report:

The Council's Empowering our Communities strategy identifies that a Citizens' Panel will be set up. A Panel will also support the corporate objective of enhancing 'evidence-based decision-making;' strengthening the evidence base used to support decision-making.

Many local authorities utilise Citizens' Panels to generate feedback on the role of the council and the value of new initiatives.

Royal Holloway, University of London has compiled a report setting out the literature exploring the role of a Citizens' Panel and the additional value it brings over more traditional, one-way consultative mechanisms like postal or telephone surveys. This offers a more deliberative democratic format designed to engage in more extended and active debate and deliberation by a representative sample of residents.

Whilst it is expected that the Citizens' Panel will provide invaluable insight through their views and opinions, it will not be a decision-making body.

Recommendation(s):

That Corporate Management Committee members

- 1. Recognise the value of a Citizens' Panel in gathering evidence on residents' views of council and potentially partner organisations' services.**
- 2. Approve the establishment of a Runnymede Citizens' Panel .**
- 3. Approve expenditure of £10,000 Shared Prosperity Fund to recruit the membership of the Panel.**
- 4. Virement of the remaining costs associated with the Panel from the central Community Budget, held by the Chief Executive. This will enable the authority to offer participants a small incentive for retaining their membership.**

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 In September 2022 the Council's Corporate Management Committee approved the Empowering our Communities Strategy. That strategy included a commitment to develop a citizens' panel.

"Formulate an engagement strategy including reference to communities in deprived areas. The primary tool emanating from this will be the re-launch of the Citizens' Panel as a representative sample of the Runnymede community. This will subsequently be used to draw standing panels for individual issues and consultations, including on climate change. The panel will also be used to select focus groups for specific topics." (Empowering our Communities Strategy page 7).

- 1.2 Citizens' Panels are used across local government as a tool to generate a representative view of the thoughts of residents on a range of local issues.
- "A Citizens' Panel aims to be a representative, consultative body of local residents. They are typically used by statutory agencies, particularly local authorities, and their partners, to consult service users and non-users on specific issues."* Involve – the UK's public participation charity.
- 1.3 Citizens' Panels are a way of conducting qualitative and quantitative research of the general public or a particular cohort (e.g. by age). Qualitative research in particular can be conducted face to face or remotely. Panel members are likely to be selected at random from the resident population and are expected to reflect their own views on a variety of topics.
- 1.4 If the Panel is structured in a way that generates representative views, it does not enable special interest groups to volunteer to be part of a working group. The aim will be to recruit 1% of the Runnymede population (approximately 880 people) who will be representative of the community as a whole.
- 1.5 Resident feedback and input on initiatives also supports the corporate commitment articulated within the Empowering our Communities Strategy of enhancing the evidence-base when making decisions.
- "Evidence-based decision making; The quality of decisions made on behalf of our residents is going to be determined largely by listening to our residents and examining evidence and data that informs our decisions."* Runnymede Borough Council's Empowering our Communities Strategy page 6.
- 1.6 Understanding the views of residents alongside other forms of evidence is one of the tools that will help support decision makers when deliberating the relative strengths and weaknesses of arguments on a topic.
- 1.7 It is anticipated that reports to Committee or Full Council will include details of consultation undertaken with the Citizens' Panel (where appropriate) as a standard part of the report template. This will enable Councillors to understand the sentiment of the local community on a topic when also considering other evidence.
- 1.8 Locally a number of authorities have established panels. These include: -
- Epsom and Ewell
 - Guildford
 - Kensington and Chelsea
 - Reading
 - Surrey County Council
 - Surrey Heath
 - Woking
- 1.9 Use of the Citizens' Panel will supersede individual consultation initiatives, thereby producing a swing in due course across all service areas where consultation with the public is necessary.
- 2. Establishing a Citizens' Panel**
- 2.1 The enclosed report (Appendix A), developed by Royal Holloway, University of London, identifies the successes of local panels in gleaning public views on topics.

- 2.2 The report also considers the most effective mechanisms for structuring the membership of the Panel to ensure it is representative of different geographies and cohorts of residents.
- 2.3 Several citizens' panels offer incentives for participation, ensuring high response rates. Incentives are also offered to minimize the number of residents leaving the panel, minimising the need for further recruitment.

Examples of incentives are: -

- Cardiff Youth Citizens' Panel runs quarterly prize draws.
 - Surrey Heartlands – contribute to charity for every survey completed.
- 2.4 The report proposes that Council tenants are recruited as one 'population cohort.' Incentives for undertaking consultation on housing related issues with this cohort can be funded by the Housing Revenue Account.

3. **The Business Case for a Citizens' Panel**

- 3.1 It is anticipated that setting up a Citizens' Panel representative of the population will require external support from a market research company (MORI, Opinion Research etc). It is anticipated that this support will cost approximately £15,000 per annum based on the experience of Surrey County Council and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.
- 3.2 The Council's relationship with the Royal Holloway, University of London could enable the authority to tap into their market research expertise.
- 3.3 It is also anticipated that the Panel will require an annual budget to ensure it can incentivise participation.
- 3.4 It is proposed the Panel is run independently of operational departments. This will ensure it operates to the highest research standards.
- 3.5 It is proposed it is administered internally within the Council by the Electoral Services Team with recruitment being supported by our Communications and Marketing Team.
- 3.6 It is estimated that the Council spends approximately £50,000 annually undertaking surveying and consultation activity that could be absorbed by a Citizens' Panel.
- 3.7 The Council does undertake other consultation activity, but this is likely to be locally focused (such as consultation on planning applications) or focused on specific cohorts of the population (such as statutory consultation on changes to the landlord function) to be undertaken via a Citizens' Panel.
- 3.8 It is anticipated that as the Council increasingly seeks to garner the views of its population this spend is likely to increase, which would strengthen the value for money benefits of a Citizens' Panel.

4. **Policy Framework**

- 4.1 The Corporate Business Plan 2022-2026 establishes 5 broad themes – one of which is empowering communities, which seeks to support groups and societies with

initiatives to strengthen their communities and to represent and advocate for our residents' interests.

4.2 Empowering Communities Strategy identifies 7 strategic priorities – priority 1 is evidenced-based decision making which includes a commitment to establishing a Citizens' Panel.

4.3 Results from the Citizens' Panel are expected to provide an additional tools to support decision making by members. It is not anticipated that results determine policy per se but are an aid to members in providing real time evidence of public opinion which may be one of many factors determining an outcome.

5. **Resource implications/Value for Money**

5.1 It is anticipated that £15,000 will be required to establish the Citizens' Panel.

5.2 It is anticipated that the Panel will require an annual budget of £15,000 to ensure it continues to operate successfully and can offer incentives.

5.3 Other incentives for participation should be funded from departmental budgets from where the consultation originates.

5.4 It is anticipated that by operating the panel successfully it will generate savings for the authority. Work will be undertaken to identify these savings and capture them in the Planning, Housing, Community Services and Environmental Services budgets particularly.

6. **Legal implications**

6.1 Wherever there is a duty to consult, it is a duty to engage in lawful (and therefore fair) consultation. Similarly, if a public authority chooses to consult (whether or not required to do so), the consultation must be adequate and fair.

6.2 It is not the intention of officers and Members to replace all consultation with relevant parties by way of consulting with the Citizen's Panel. Where there is a statutory requirement or published statutory guidance to consult with specific individuals or groups, the Citizens' Panel will be an additional forum where consultation will occur (where appropriate) rather than as a replacement to existing consultees.

6.3 By way of example, there is a statutory requirement to consult its tenants further to section 105 of the Housing Act 1985 on matters of housing management.

6.4 Should the establishment of a Citizens' Panel be agreed by Members, a review of Annex 4 of the Constitution – Consultation Guidance – will need to be carried out to reflect the role of the Panel within the Council's principles for consultation.

7. **Equality implications**

7.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment is required to ensure the Citizens' Panel is set up in a way which promotes access to all parts of the Runnymede community. The process for selecting Members of the Citizens' Panel and how they are communicated with will also need to comply with the Council's Public Sector Equality duty in accordance with s.149 of the Equality Act 2010.

7.2 Monitoring of response rates is also essential to ensure all parts of the community are engaging and giving feedback during the consultation exercises.

8. **Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications**

8.1 The establishment of a Citizens' Panel has no direct environmental, sustainability, or biodiversity implications although getting a representative view of residents on these issues will help guide Runnymede Borough Council's approach.

9. **Other implications**

9.1 Personal data will be protected during the set-up and running of the Citizens' Panel. Any external organisation supporting the set-up will need to assure the Council that their arrangements for protecting personal data are robust and reflect best practice.

10. **Timetable for Implementation**

10.1 It is anticipated that if this proposal is supported by the Corporate Management Committee, the Council will commence work to establish a Citizens' Panel from September 2023.

11. **Conclusions**

11.1 This project has been identified as a key priority for the Council within the Empowering our Communities Strategy.

11.2 Establishing a Panel will have cost savings for the authority as well as enrich the quality of the data held by the authority. It will also support the corporate objective of enhancing "evidence-based decision making."

(To resolve)

Background papers

[Report to the Corporate Management Committee requesting approval for the Empowering our Communities Strategy](#)