

# Deepening public participation in local policy making: a review of deliberative democratic governance for Runnymede Borough Council

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## Summary

Democratic politics is faced by a number of challenges regarding citizen participation. Disillusionment with democratic politics has increased over several decades and citizens rarely engage with local politicians and officials. Furthermore, any interactions that do take place are often with unrepresentative groups and individuals, who possess significant advantages in terms of economic resources and civic skills. Surveys show that citizens are actually quite keen to engage in local decision-making, and Councils can benefit hugely from involving them in the decision-making process: improving the quality of policies, providing greater legitimacy, and making implementation more straightforward. So, there is a clear opportunity for local authorities to deliver more inclusive and effective public policy.

Runnymede Borough Council wishes to establish a consultative mechanism through which to engage actively with residents for different purposes. To assist the Council, this report therefore provides a systematic review of the evidence regarding the various kinds and formats available from academic and policy literatures internationally but with a primary focus on the UK. This review was augmented by selected interviews with key informants and a small set of focus group discussions with Runnymede residents. There is a clear distinction between more traditional, one-way consultative mechanisms like postal or telephone surveys on the one hand and the range of deliberative democratic formats like citizens' panels, juries and assemblies designed to engage in more extended and active debate and deliberation by a representative sample of residents.

In the light of this evidence and a detailed examination of the demographic composition of Runnymede and its constituent wards, a deliberative format is recommended comprising a representative one percent sample of the borough population, structured so that subsets can be identified according to demographic, socio-economic and geographical characteristics for consultations specifically relevant to them. The sequence and criteria for the Council to decide on its preferred format and delivery process (as between in-house and subcontracted/outsourced provision in part or whole) are clearly set out. In order to maximise appropriateness, detailed selection of an external provider, if desired, should be undertaken only after these decisions have been made.

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## Introduction

Participation in local governance is important for many reasons, such as the ability of local populations to accommodate their own unique cultures and geographies (Burns, Hambleton, & Hoggett 1994), to resist centralised policy imposition (Teles 2023), and to tailor public services to local needs (Steiner, McMillan & O'Connor 2022). Yet, turnout within local representative democracy within the UK remains low and both socially and spatially uneven (The Electoral Commission 2022; Einstein, Glick, Godinez Puig & Palmer 2022), as is participation in local decision-making processes. Yet a growing body of literature shows that citizen participation in democracy is important for building trust in democracy and developing a more informed and cost-effective local policy decision (Ostrom 1990; Fung 2006).

Electoral politics, with its mass parties, perceived artificial polarisation and commonly distrusted politicians thought beholden to other interests, both locally and nationally, is often seen as perfunctory and formalistic. Accordingly, it is losing favour, especially amongst upcoming generations, who are more involved in informal, issue-based forms of engagement (Tormey 2015; Vromen 2003). Moreover, hurdles like the recently introduced voter ID laws (Barton 2022) and a lack of knowledge and political efficacy disproportionately affect the participation of marginalised groups, including some ethnic minorities and the elderly (Brennen 2020).

According to the Local Government Association (LGA), “[l]ocal democracy is strongest when there are high levels of civic representation, where citizens voices are heard and taken into account in local decision-making” (Local Government Association 2021). This kind of engagement and the concept of deliberative democracy more broadly have their roots in Athenian democracy (Ipsos MORI 2021). Nowadays, in addition to statutory provisions and the common law of the ‘doctrine of legitimate expectation’ legally requiring the consultation of citizens in certain circumstances (for example in the context of healthcare changes, budget cuts or environmental issues) (Local Government Association 2019b), there are significant advantages for local authorities to consult citizens.

Working regularly with citizens through different forms of engagement allows councils to improve their dialogue and relationship with them (Local Government Association 2019a, p. 10). New ideas and suggestions can be easily accessed, expectations managed, and council activities and policies can thus be shaped around the needs and aspirations of citizens (Local Government Association 2023g). This has the potential to improve planning as well as policy and decision making and can thus ultimately lead to better services and provide a way of governing by consent (Local Government Association 2019a, p. 15; 2023). As a result, the cohesion of communities as well as trust in democracy,

the community and the system can be increased (Local Government Association 2019a, p. 47). By allowing local authorities to make better use of resources and by minimising the risk of judicial review, consultation can also accelerate the economic efficiency of the organisations of local authorities (Local Government Association 2019a, pp. 6, 15). Ultimately, “[...] consultation is about ensuring decision-makers have all the facts they need to make a choice for their community [...]” (Local Government Association 2019a, p. 61) and local government can be found in an ideal situation to carry out this exercise of trust and community building (Local Government Association 2019a, p. 5).

Accordingly, local government officials have been searching for ways to improve engagement with their councils (Local Government Association 2022). This can take many different forms. Local residents can be offered an opportunity to consult – either online or in-person – or be polled on a particular policy decision. At the other end of the spectrum, deliberative democracy, i.e., inviting citizens into discussions over particular issues (Runnymede Borough Council 2022), offers a more intensive but ultimately more rewarding form of engagement by generating ideas and testing out different policy solutions.

Consultation is highly encouraged and in specific instances a statutory requirement in the UK (Local Government Association 2023e; 2023h). This importance placed on creating and enhancing civic space keeps democracies distinct from authoritarian regimes (Anderson et al. 2021). Whilst simple polling and consultation exercises remain the most common form of local engagement, there have been many experiments in deliberative democracy over recent decades (Galimberti 2022). This has led to some useful practical guides, such as those provided by [Citizensassemblies.org](https://citizensassemblies.org) (2018a; 2018b) and [Involve.org](https://involve.org) (2018).

The deliberative engagement of citizens promises several broad advantages. These include levelling or at least moderating unequal underlying power relations to co-produce policy (Turnhout et al. 2020), utilising diverse perspectives, enhancing civic skills (Tippett & How 2020), reinvigorating relations between citizens and formal political institutions (Dasgupta & Williams 2022), generating public support for specific policies (Wells, Howarth & Brand-Correa 2021), avoiding short-termism (Machin, 2023), finding a way past gridlock, confrontation, partisanship, and polarisation (Wells et al. 2021), and starting wider public conversations via news and social media about what local authorities are doing.

The enthusiasm for co-production of public services has meant that practice has lead theory (Durose & Richardson 2016; Tippett & How 2020). In other words, public consultations often lack conceptual coherence or an evidence base and are not founded on best practice. Hence, Wells et al. (2021) call for further research on what works and in what circumstance in parallel with the growing number of

deliberative events. This literature review investigates different forms of consultation and their strengths and weaknesses, by examining their key attributes: recruitment, structure, and impact. The main forms of consultation are discussed: beginning with the simplest forms – surveys and focus groups – before turning to more complex deliberative events.

This report will argue that an appropriate form of ‘citizens panel’ would enable Runnymede Borough Council or other local authorities to use a combination of different methods or consultation depending upon the policy issue (what is, how it is resourced, and at what stage of development it is) and the need for local knowledge and/ or popular support from the total population or particular sub-groups e.g. over-65s, students, council house tenant, residents of a particular town or ward, In the borough.

## Literature Review

### *Consultative Surveys and Simple Focus Groups*

Surveys or polls remain the most popular form of local consultation. They can be used to present residents with their preferences on different policy alternatives or be used – earlier on in the policy-making process – to understand citizens’ priorities. The advantage of the type of surveys usually sent out by Councils is that they can be quick and easy to distribute, and quick and easy to analyse in their simplest form. However, they also have a number of problems. First, local authority surveys tend not to be representative, and so they are often self-selective. This means that the results will tend to be skewed towards those who are older (or if they are online, away from the most elderly in the population) and with higher degrees of educational attainment, those who have lived in the borough for a longer period of time, or those with a strongly-held or vested interest in the issue(s) at hand. Second, surveys may ask citizens about questions they do not know much about – so, citizens’ responses may be uninformed and may be founded upon expectations of the Council that are unrealistic with regard to resources or time scales or beyond its set of competences (Wells et al. 2021).

Completing a survey does not allow an in-depth understanding of how policies will affect different people or encourage behavioural change. Surveys are, however, the only method here allowing private responses. This reduces self-presentation concerns (Spears & Lea 1994) of participants feeling self-conscious to air their real opinions publicly. Being primarily quantitative, surveys are best used in policy areas requiring quantifying of public opinion. For instance, when a council wants to

understand attitudes towards use of residents' personal data, a survey can quantify which uses of data will generate a majority of public support (Downham 2023). Surveys tend to be a cheaper option, allowing a more rigorous, representative sample of the population to be consulted relatively quickly and easily. However, in addition to the bias in responses already noted, there can be a lack of qualitative detail or explanation in responses.

In some consultation exercises, surveys have been used to complement focus groups work and deliberative events, which can make sure that the questions councils are asking are the most appropriate, i.e., that they are well-informed by local knowledge and appropriate to citizens levels of knowledge or reference frames (Greater London Authority 2019).

Focus group discussions are cheaper than deliberative events (Wells et al. 2021). They involve consulting the public in small groups, except without experts and the lengthy deliberation processes described below. This means that they are best used for well-known and simpler policy areas. The quickness of focus groups and questionnaires may reduce inequalities in terms of who has the time to participate, compared to extensive deliberative events (Tippett & How 2020). A key feminist critique of deliberative democracy is that women, especially the most marginalised, are still busiest with unpaid work (Celis & Childs 2020). Focus groups primarily recruit from various community groups, for convenience. These might be less representative of the population though. For example, active community members may be more civic minded and more positive towards the council. However, they are very useful for testing out ideas that have interest for a particular set of residents e.g., the provision of holiday activities for families with small children.

### *Deliberative Events*

For deliberative events (which may actually comprise multi-session processes), an independent oversight panel or advisory board of key stakeholders is often set up to oversee the process from the beginning (Wells et al. 2021). Avoiding perceptions of bias is key. Consultations tend to be run or at least facilitated by external organisations or specialised facilitators expert in deliberation, like universities, deliberative democracy organisations and charities. As specified in Table 1 below, there is a wide range of deliberative formats.

	<i>Citizens' juries</i>	<i>Planning Cells</i>	<i>Consensus conferences</i>	<i>Deliberative polls</i>	<i>Citizens' assemblies</i>
<b>Developed by (first instance)</b>	Crosby (USA, 1971)	Dienel (Germany, 1970s)	Danish Board of Technology (1987)	James Fishkin (USA, 1994)	Gordon Gibson (Canada, 2002)
<b>No. of citizens</b>	12-26	100-500	10-25	100-500	100-160
<b>No. of meetings</b>	2-5 days	4-5 days	7-8 days	2-3 days	20-30 days
<b>Selection method</b>	Random selection	Random selection	Random + self-selection	Random selection	Random + self-selection
<b>Activities</b>	Information + deliberation	Information + deliberation	Information + deliberation	Information + deliberation	Information +consultation +deliberation
<b>Result</b>	Collective position report	Survey opinions + Collective position report	Collective position report	Survey opinions	Detailed recommendation
<b>Destination of proposal</b>	Sponsor and mass media	Sponsor and mass media	Parliament and mass media	Sponsor and mass media	Parliament, government and public referendum

Table 1: Main categories of deliberative event (Elstub and McLaverty 2014).

Deliberative consultations tend to seek participants who are representative of the relevant population (Wells et al. 2021). The smallest tend to include only 12–30 people. They are often called citizens' juries. Larger ones include 50–160 people and are often called citizens' assemblies. Therefore, the cost per one-off exercise varies from £25,000 to £500,000 (Wells et al. 2021). The largest involve 100-500 people and are often called planning cells (Dienel 2009). The strength of smaller options is that they are cheaper and easier (Ayano 2021). The weakness is that they are less representative (Citizensassemblies.org 2018b). It can be harder to enable everyone to be heard in bigger deliberative events (Citizensassemblies.org 2018b). If a crisis comes along, for example a pandemic, expensive consultations may become the last priority, and be cut in duration or depth (Wells et al 2021). Generally, there is a risk with expensive deliberative events in that they can be rushed to cut costs and/or save time (Rishbeth et al. 2018).

Importantly, however, size is not the only distinguishing characteristic, and the choice of format should be appropriate to the intended purpose. For example, in essence, a citizens' jury may be small but should function in a more extended, intensive and interactive manner, in which a group of representative citizens hear presentations from, and ask questions of, a set of experts on the topic in hand, including advocates of different proposed actions or 'solutions' then deliberate and deliver a verdict to the council. A variation of this theme would have a jury select its two top options for presentation to a wider citizens' panel or survey. Similarly, a citizens' assembly is larger and can debate particular issues on behalf of the population they represent (Durose & Richardson 2016;

Egerod & Larsen 2021; Ipsos MORI 2021; LGA 2023b). The rest of this section focuses on the broad definitional and procedural issues; detailed cases studies of their application are given in Annex 1.

### *Consultations and Sampling*

Surveys can be distributed by post or online to invite citizens to participate, with the negative consequences set out above, or can be carried out by selecting a representative sample by a professional polling company or similar organisation e.g., university. However, representative samples for local authority areas are hard and expensive to develop. The potential advantage of a standing citizens' panel is that it could be developed through stratified random sampling (explained below) and provide an ongoing resource for a Council. However, the Council or its subcontractor would need to be pro-active in maintaining the size, representative composition and response rate of the panel due to natural rates of attrition (which can be quite high but are heavily dependent upon both frequency of use and incentives provided for panel members (see below). A panel of one percent of a population e.g., 900 people in Runnymede, would certainly be sufficient to undertake representative surveys, provided that the response rate was relatively high (above 30%). Indeed, 30–35% is the average response rate for postal or unfacilitated online surveys.

Stratified random sampling is the most widely used recruitment method (Local Government Association 2023b). Unlike entirely random sampling, a target population is divided along important demographic traits, ideally at least gender, age, district, and education level. Such a panel can be used for surveys but also for more deliberative exercises. So, for citizens' assemblies or applied focus groups, a random representative sample is drawn from each of those strata. A Penrose method, also known as a square-root method, can calculate a proportionate number of participants to draw from each area (Citizensassemblies.org 2018b). There can be proportionate sampling, or disproportionate sampling, where strata may be purposefully unequally represented. Some consultations oversample marginalised groups to avoid them being drowned out – minorities for example (Wells et al. 2021). Likewise, women or young people may be quieter in large or demographically mixed deliberative events (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014). So, alternative methods may be adopted to put participants at ease and thus to contribute with less inhibition. Such methods include active facilitation, splitting the discussions up into smaller groups or into groups representing categories that are less likely to engage with conventional democracy, such as young people from low-income backgrounds.

Making the demographic composition of the panel non-representative of the population may, however, be a questionable practice. Since women and minorities are disproportionately inclined to

more progressive views (Sloam & Henn 2018), it could potentially be viewed as biasing the process. On the other hand, there is also evidence that those of a progressive persuasion are already more likely to participate in deliberative democracy (Farrell et al. 2020). For example, in the Irish citizens' assembly for constitutional change on abortion, the stratified random sampling did not account for political stance.

Necessarily recruiting based on only a few demographic traits means that the sample may not be perfectly descriptively representative of the whole population, let alone substantively, as, for instance, regarding political views (Farrell et al. 2020). Some recruitment processes ensure a substantively representative range of attitudes towards the topic at hand, while others do not (Wells et al. 2021). That raises questions of how imbalanced a sample can be in terms of attitudes, and whether different sides are well represented. A seminal citizens' jury, on the impact of agriculture on water quality, had half the panel be the mainly effected group; farmers, because otherwise farmers would only be 6% of the population and sample (Crosby et al. 1986). For policy areas concerning only a narrow part of the community, like elderly people or those with a disability, a deliberative event representative of the whole population may be unnecessarily broad. Still, the whole population could be relevant, like if there is public funding involved (Citizensassemblies.org 2018b). More detailed consideration of the demographic composition of Runnymede's overall population and by ward, as the basis for drawing up an appropriate panel composition is provided in Annex 3.

Prospective participants can be randomly selected through the electoral register. If so, they should be communicated with via appropriate channels. Not everyone will have internet access, for instance. Two weeks is a good time to leave for responses (Citizensassemblies.org 2018b).

Participation in multiple waves of a citizen panel might be discouraged, to allow other citizens a chance. Experts and various stakeholder groups should also be invited. Those working in government, or other organisations within the specific topic area, should come as stakeholders, not participants. Stakeholders can include both formal organisations and informal groups, even an individual giving non-expert testimony (Farrell et al. 2020). Exact participants can be determined by a random selection (also known as sortition) process.

To obtain some insights into RBC residents' perceptions of existing Council consultations and their preferences and perceptions of the options discussed in this report, a small, non-representative set of focus group discussions was undertaken in the Egham/Englefield Green area. The findings have been incorporated into relevant parts of the following text, while detailed summaries are provided in Annex 2.

To encourage participation and reduce attrition rates and hence the time and effort of replenishing the representative panel size, provision of some form of compensation as an incentive is widely used and is recommended. This could take the form of money, vouchers, the prospect of making important decisions, and/or recognition of the panellists' role by the Council, for example by providing a certificate of participation to strengthen the CVs for young members. Such incentives are particularly important for unwaged, poor and others for whom the time taken to participate represents an opportunity cost or who, like young minority groups, rarely participate in conventional democratic processes.

### *Running Deliberative Events*

First, there can be some kind of introduction and icebreaker (Citizensassemblies.org 2018b). Next, a range of experts, followed by stakeholder groups, present information on the topic at hand. Participants then cross-examine them, before deliberating with each other. Participants devise recommendations. Ranked choice voting on proposals is recommended, for nuance. The recommendation achieving the highest degree of consensus amongst participants, proposed to be 80% since unanimity is rarely attainable and, indeed, may not be entirely desirable (Machin 2023), wins. It is possible that proposals may need to be revised and voted on again to achieve this. The result is announced, and as soon as possible the recommendations can be acknowledged by authorities and if deemed appropriate, implemented. Binding versus non-binding recommendations are discussed later.

One deliberative event might run for eight evening sessions totalling thirty hours, another across two weekends. The biggest version, planning cells, usually runs for four days. There is some talk of citizens needing longer than might be expected, to enable enough in-depth discussion. The longest citizen jury seen in the UK spanned four years, run by Tony Blair's Labour government. Cost and participant fatigue became significant (Local Government Association 2023a). Equally representative substitute participants are recommended, particularly for longer events, about 20% of the main sample (Citizensassemblies.org 2018b).

Deliberative events start with a problem statement. Some use a narrow, closed question (Wells et al. 2021). They might ask how ambitious the council should be on, for example, climate change, and give options of increasing ambitiousness across defined policy areas over which the council has remit. This ensures that recommendations are actually actionable, but limits citizen input. Citizens perform more of a consultative role here, rather than it being citizen-led. Other deliberative events

have a broader, open question, inviting participants to propose policy themselves, which takes longer (Wells et al. 2021). Diemel (2009) defines 'open problems', where an open-ended, creative process is required to innovate an as of yet unknown solution. Open problems are best addressed by 'future workshops', events that do just that. Meanwhile, 'conflictual problems' are where there are standard solutions, but it is more about solving disagreements among different groups on which is (most) appropriate. Citizens' juries or planning cells are best for this because they can elucidate a mandate for one policy solution over another. The topic can be complex, as long as it can be explained enough in the early, learning phase of the event, rather than requiring years of study (Citizensassemblies.org 2022). The topic must not be too simple. It must generate enough debate and challenge (Citizensassemblies.org 2018b).

Nowadays, deliberation can occur online, for example in urban planning (Zeiderman et al. 2017). Afzalan, Sanchez & Evans-Cowley (2017) evaluate several digital platforms designed for deliberation, like MySideWalk, PlaceSpeak, CitySourced and Crowdbrite, but also social media like Facebook and Nextdoor. Authors discuss a range of considerations for choosing platforms, including the capacities of one's organisation, the community, the platform, the planning problem and participation goals, and various norms and regulations. The aim is to lower costs yet increase accessibility. However, there is evidence that, for example, online livestreaming of council meetings does not significantly increase the diversity of attendees (Einstein et al. 2022) but might increase the number observing.

Now for a global south perspective. In Bengal, India, village development committees were set up in the late 2000s for participatory planning, as recounted by Dasgupta & Williams (2022). The government set up these committees as hybrids, containing the elected local council, and residents via neighbourhood meetings. Committees were given shares of UK development funds and deliberative meetings to address their own priorities. Soon a malfunctioning public distribution system plus state seizures of land contributed to government unpopularity, then mass violence, before a new government was installed and the committees were closed down.

Co-production of public services or urban design, for example, must accommodate linguistic diversity, different epistemic communities, and cultures (Durose & Richardson 2016; Nikulina et al. 2019; Hemström et al 2021). A weakness of deliberative events, then, is the accompanying depoliticising discourse (Machin 2023; Turnhout et al. 2020). A participant is expected to align their political opinions with what is considered rational, scientific, and the emerging consensus, rather than having their unique perspective from their lived experience valued and addressed. Turnhout et al. call for organisers, scientists and other elites involved to level power relations, and empower the participants to define their own role and goal. Others argue that this is impossible and that

deliberative democracy is an illusion, just maintaining existing power structures (Tippett & How 2020; Tormey 2015). Moreover, some critiques of citizen assemblies (and, by implication, other deliberative formats being reviewed here), argue that they have a problematic in-built assumption that consensus will emerge but that this is not always either possible or desirable, since minority voices should be recorded and not scripted out (e.g., Machin 2023).

Providing evidence of the impact from previous deliberative events can increase enthusiasm among residents (Tippett & How 2020). Some deliberative events use hands-on or visual approaches, like Ketso kits, to better accommodate those less keen on speaking publicly. To ensure fairness and transparency, deliberative events, including the selection of members, presentations, information packs, and votes, should be publicly available, like on a website. The event could even be livestreamed (Citizensassemblies.org 2018b).

### *The Impact of Deliberative Consultation Exercises*

Wells et al. (2021) distinguish processes as either having a direct impact, as in recommendations being directly turned into policy, or an indirect impact, like influencing policymakers, participants and public views, promoting wider public debate, or stimulating greater public engagement. A mandate put forward in a deliberative event is more difficult to dismiss than that from, for example, a group of environmental campaigners. One possible recommendation from a deliberative process could be to offer a referendum on the topic at hand, garnering more legitimacy perhaps, by switching to direct democracy to involve all voters. This was done in the Irish citizens' assembly on abortion (Farrell et al. 2020).

Arnstein (1969) coined an 8-rung 'ladder of citizen participation.' The lowest rungs represent 'nonparticipation' (rungs 1-2), up to 'degrees of tokenism' (rungs 3-5), then at the top, 'degrees of citizen power' (rungs 6-8). This was recently modified to include forms of co-production at the upper end (Simon 2021). A strength of deliberative events is that they give citizens some level of power through their recommendations, fitting at least rung 6, 'partnership.' Meanwhile, the weakness of surveys and focus groups is that they risk fitting rung 5, 'placation.' Citizens are consulted but can simply be overruled. They have no power. 'Citizen control' is the eighth rung.

During the agenda setting stage of policy making, consultations might avoid legitimacy questions because they will not lead to specific policies. Getting in early means that the consultation may be more effective in steering policymaking, allowing more meaningful participation to those involved (Wells et al. 2021). Some deliberative events stress from the outset that the recommendations will

be merely advisory, not binding, to defuse tension, high stakes and high expectations (Citizensassemblies.org 2022). Participants can at least be guaranteed that their recommendations will be given full consideration by authorities. The strength of binding recommendations is that they will further encourage citizens and experts to participate (Citizensassemblies.org 2018b). The weakness is that the recommendations ultimately might not be desirable or practical to implement. Ignoring recommendations risks ruining public trust in deliberative democracy for years to come (Cabannes 2015).

Other risks include that politicians can champion consultations they have done, without the consultations actually revealing anything new (Wells et al. 2021). Furthermore, there can be pressure to concede, and to delegate decision-making to the consultation. Decision making is not often wholly devolved to the citizens. This is still deliberative and not direct democracy. Giving so much power to few unelected, unaccountable citizens could be considered undemocratic. Another risk is that panels can be set up merely to rubber stamp existing plans, especially if councils come under pressure to respond to a panel's recommendations, despite policy requiring far longer to be developed. It can take years before consultations bear policy. Plans, theoretically, could have been more ambitious than the maximum set by a deliberative event. Perhaps once a consultation puts out a target, there becomes less incentive for a council to be any bolder. Like most research and politics (Stockemer & Sundström 2022), current methods mostly involve only adults 18+ by default. This ignores younger people, who have to live with the impact of new policy decisions for far longer. Participants aged 16+ do not pose additional ethics requirements. Work with those younger just requires parental consent instead.

## Conclusions

Participation in local governance is important for many reasons. Yet, turnout within established democracies remains low and unrepresentative. Local government officials have been searching for ways to improve engagement with their councils. Deliberative democracy, inviting citizens into the discussion of specific issues, offers a path forward, and could be used in combination with other forms of consultation e.g., surveys and focus groups, through the setting up of a Citizens Panel.

Several forms of consultation have been investigated, and their strengths and weaknesses identified through their key attributes; recruitment, structure, and then impact. A mixed-methods approach – using surveys or polls, focus groups and deliberative exercise - is optimal, to cancel out limitations of

each approach and retain the best of all worlds. The method used must complement the type of policy:

- The policy area covered and likely level of citizens' knowledge, and the *need* for local knowledge from the Council's perspective
- The relevance of the areas for a particular group of residents e.g., based on age, area, gender
- The stage of development of the policy (e.g., if it early in the process a deliberative consultation may be preferable, if it is near the end surveys is better advised)
- How the policy is to be resourced (residents will react differently to engagement about newly resourced initiatives as opposed to policies without new funding)
- The *need* for popular support (from the perspective of the Council) from the total population or particular sub-groups for successful implementation of a policy or initiative

As in this view, the literature review supports surveying a representative sample of residents to rigorously quantify public opinion, as well as using one of the qualitative methods to zoom in on specific demographics, for example, young people, to get more tailored and detailed responses.

The main differences found among the qualitative methods assessed here are the number of citizens involved, how long the event lasts, the direct monetary costs associated with each, and the indirect costs involved if long processes delay decisions and implementation of solutions. At one end of the spectrum, focus groups are small, quick, single sessions with little time for deliberation. On the other hand, planning cells involve up to 500 participants in robust deliberation over multiple days. Exactly how deliberative this element can be then, will likely ultimately depend on available funding.

## Recommendations

The report has investigated various methods by which local authorities might consult with its citizens, with a focus on the strengths and weaknesses of surveys, focus groups and deliberative forms of consultation with regard to:

- how they are structured
- who is consulted and
- the impact those consultations have on Council policy

The efficiency and value of these different approaches are determined by several factors:

### 1. Complexity of the policy area

If residents are considered to have a generally low level of knowledge regarding the policy area on which the local authority wishes to consult, e.g., the creation of civic spaces, then deliberative forms of consultation will be optimal. If the policy area involves a less complex decision e.g., on whether to introduce controlled parking zones (CPZs) in residential areas, consultation might more easily be undertaken as a poll or survey to all residents in the area concerned (recognising that the results are likely to be skewed by age, level of education attainment etc.) or to all individuals on a more representative Citizens Panel (described above).

### 2. Relevance of the policy or issue to a particular group

In cases where an issue or decision is relevant to a particular demographic group e.g., young people, those with a disability, focus groups or a deliberative exercise (that could be recruited from the relevant component within a standing Citizens Panel) would be effective forms of consultation. This is especially the case where the consultation occurs at an early stage in the decision-making process, as this would provide local ideas and knowledge to inform policy and provide greater legitimacy. This would also be an appropriate first step for launching a co-design or co-production process (see main report).

### 3. Stage of development of the policy

The point at which citizens are consulted is absolutely critical to the process. If citizens are consulted early on and have a role in providing various policy options and/ or are informed about the feasibility of different options for the Council (e.g., through deliberative methods), they can help develop policies that are more informed (tested by citizens whose local knowledge would help the Council understand how policies might be refined or changed to improve implementation). Deliberative methods are more suited to early consultation and/or for launching a more substantive co-design or

co-production process (see main report), but they are also resource-intensive and may be subject to high levels of 'attrition' (citizens dropping out part of the way through the deliberative process). Alternatively, focus groups and surveys might be deployed at several points in time over the policy development process. Establishing a citizens' panel, jury or assembly (with clear benefits for participants) can be seen as a potential solution for maintaining citizen engagement over time.

#### 4. How the policy is resourced

Where the policy areas are very tightly constrained by resources, it might seem optimal to consult the public on only a small range of options. However, this would leave the Council vulnerable to accusations of prejudging solutions that might not match residents' priorities or preferences. Another school of thought therefore holds that policy areas with particularly tight budgetary constraints are ripe for consultation. There is evidence to show that, in these circumstances, local knowledge can offer out-of-the-box solutions – through focus groups or deliberative exercises – that might, for example, provide alternative civil society solutions e.g., to the closure of a youth centre. On the other hand, residents are likely to have a more positive experience if they are invited to discuss or deliberate on how money is to be spent for a particular initiative to address a local problem. The panel could provide an excellent resource for recruiting residents for both purposes.

The sample focus groups (described in Annex 2) suggested that a number of themes regarding citizen engagement were important:

1. Communication: how the Council interacts with residents. Online forms of engagement and leafleting may seem more efficient but are often less popular. They allow only for a one-way flow of information and few genuine interactions. It is, therefore, suggested that the Council considers how priority policy issues could be communicated more directly to citizens with opportunities for genuine interactions (potentially by nominating and rewarding individuals on the Panel to actively inform others in their communities).
2. Knowledge: The communication dimension should be very carefully considered as focus group participants expressed a lack of knowledge about what the Council does (this is a very common response across the UK), what it could do, or what areas it is responsible for. The Council should consider partnering with various institutions in the Borough e.g., schools, Colleges, day care centres, to improve the current situation. A Citizens' Panel could function as a way to increase and spread knowledge about Council activities in the Borough.

3. Engagement: focus groups participants wanted the Council to address meaningful issues that had a bearing on citizens' everyday lives. Encouragingly, most participants were very willing to participate, if the participation were to be meaningful. This speaks to the engagement of citizens at an early stage in the policy development process. It should be noted that civic engagement tends to be habit-forming, so that if some citizens engage in a Panel that would be more likely to engage in other activities as well mobilise their friends to do the same.

The proposed structure of a potential Runnymede Borough Council Citizens' Panel has been set out in Annex 3. However, important decisions would also have to be made how to prioritise issues for consultation and the forms of consultation that would be most appropriate (depending upon the factors discussed above).

**As the first order decision**, we thus recommend that the following framework would be appropriate:

- A citizens' panel (or whichever version is preferred) to be set up with a broadly representative sample of around 1,000 residents (as discussed above).
- Bringing in partners at an early stage on a steering committee to help provide the expertise e.g., RHUL, and the outreach e.g., social institutions and local businesses.
- Intensive deliberative exercises to be (initially) focused on new policy initiatives with new resourcing – two or three per year with clear objectives and timelines.
- Focus groups to be undertaken 3-4 times per year with Panel members from a particular population cohort, e.g., students, social housing tenants, residents of a particular town or ward, who can help the Council address specific and pressing challenges (approximately 7 people per focus group, and 2-3 focus groups per issue).
- Surveys to be undertaken of the whole panel (approximately 4 times per year to maintain interest but prevent overload) to understand broader questions such citizens' priority issues or they behavioural preferences e.g., over environmental action.

Thereafter, **the essential second-order decision** is on who is to undertake the key tasks of

- recruiting and maintaining the membership of a citizens' panel, jury or assembly
- undertaking simpler, more limited forms of consultation, e.g., postal or telephone surveys

- the main panel consultations with the full borough or selected sub-populations identified by ward or other geographical area and/or demographic characteristics relevant to required decision, and
- small deliberative exercises, such as focus group discussions.

**The principal options**, all of which have different resource implications, are:

- run them all in-house by the Council (but note the points raised in the report and annexes about potential perceptions of bias or prejudgement, as well as resource implications)
- running postal and perhaps telephone surveys in-house and subcontracting or outsourcing the deliberative exercises
- outsourcing recruitment and maintenance of panel membership but running the consultations in-house
- outsourcing all aspects of panel recruitment and operation

**In terms of subcontracting/outsourcing, the principal options are:**

- one of the well-established and reputable commercial organisations with long and wide experience of operating phone or online consultations for diverse local authorities in this country, such as Ipsos MORI or Opinion Research Services (ORS)
- One of the newer, mainly online survey operators, some originating in the NGO/civil society sector, and which also have wide relevant experience but tend to specialise in certain thematic areas, such as climate change issues. This is a fast-evolving field but the current leaders in the UK include Citizenlab (<https://www.citizenlab.co/>), Commonplace (<https://www.commonplace.is/citizen-engagement-platform>) and EngagementHQ (<https://go.engagementhq.com/>). Others used mainly in North America include MySideWalk (<https://www.mysidewalk.com/>), PlaceSpeak (<https://www.placespeak.com/en/>), Rock Solid (into which CitySourced merged in 2019) (<https://www.rocksolid.com/onelink>), and Crowdbrite (<https://www.crowdbrite.com/>). Most of these websites have fairly short and helpful online demos; as with the more conventional providers, costs vary according to scale, frequency and the nature of consultations contracted – so detailed comparison would need to be undertaken in the light of decisions on these key parameters.

Since these decisions on the optimal combination of consultation mechanisms, extent of in-house versus subcontracted/outsourced operation, and specific outsourced provider are dependent on Council preferences, resources and how they might be leveraged through collaboration with other partners (e.g., with SCC who are already using ORS to initiate their citizens' panel), we make no

specific recommendations at this stage but would gladly engage in further discussions after the first-order decisions have been made. Fundamentally, it is essential that selected form of panel and each consultation are adequately resourced in terms of personnel if they are not to become self-defeating exercises.

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## Annex 1

### Relevant Local Examples of Deliberative Consultation

#### Key issues and procedures

The LGA provides a large number of different support services to help local governments conduct different forms of surveys and consultations and understand the satisfaction of their citizens as well as the issues that are important to them. This not only includes advice on how to decide what form of consultation is adequate for a specific purpose, but also guidance on issues such as the drawing and size of samples, the communication of results and the evaluation of the consultation process (Local Government Association 2023d; 2023e; 2023f; 2023g). The LGA's Consultation Check List, for example, gives an overview of the different stages of a consultation process and the aspects that should be kept in mind in the process (Local Government Association 2023c).

**Citizen Panels** (also called residents' or community panels) were successfully implemented as a form of consultation by a number of different councils as early as 1997 (see, Barnet Council 2023) and have provided invaluable insights into the public's opinions, ideas and needs in relation to the local area and the services provided by the council. This section introduces a variety of local examples and discusses where similarities can be found and where citizens' panels proved to be particularly successful in the past.

In the direct vicinity, Surrey County Council (SCC) is currently working on setting up a citizens' panel in order to better understand the views and ideas of residents regarding different issues of central importance, for example health and wellbeing and the local economy (Surrey County Council 2022). As a result, the Council hopes to be better able to target resources and develop services that correspond to the needs and priorities of the local population. The Council plans to run the panel online in order to minimise costs and enable rapid reporting on people's views. SCC is also explicitly reaching out to younger people, as this group is harder to engage in consultation exercises. While the panel will ultimately be run in-house, making use of already existing resources and without additional costs, SCC has commissioned Opinion Research Services (ORS) to contact residents and invite them to join the panel (Surrey County Council 2022).

To rely on external social research agencies for recruiting potential members of the panel is not unusual (e.g., Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea 2023; Surrey County Council 2022). In other instances, the selection and consultation processes are university-led (Global Centre on Healthcare and Urbanisation 2022). Georgia Gould, leader of Camden Council, has flagged the importance of

having an independent facilitator to ensure that the panel is perceived as impartial and independent (Gould & Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2019, p. 46). Indeed, the role of the Council in the process should be communicated clearly and transparently. In Camden Council's Citizens' Assembly on the Climate Crisis, for example, the involvement of Council staff at various stages of the planning and delivery process was seen as problematic (Participedia 2023).

Citizens' panels generally seem to comprise around 1,000 members, although some panels can be considerably larger. For instance, the citizens' panels of the London Borough of Barnet and of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea comprise 2,000 members each (Barnet Council 2023; Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea 2023). When panels comprise a specific sub-category of the local population, panel size can be much smaller. Examples can be found in Camden Council's Housing and Property Residents Panel, with 22 members (Camden Council 2023), or Tendring District Council's Tenants' Panel with a membership limit of 40 people (Tendring District Council 2015). In Oxford, the university-led Street Voice project aims at establishing a small-scale citizens' jury consisting of 16 residents from Headington and surrounding areas to consult them on questions about travelling in a climate-friendly and health-promoting way (Global Centre on Healthcare and Urbanisation 2022).

Concerning general citizens' panels, most councils implementing them subscribe to the idea of the panels being representative of the respective area. This includes both key demographics (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, disability, etc.) and the different types of housing and wards lived in (see, for example, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council 2023; Guildford Borough Council 2023; Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea 2023; Woking Borough Council 2023). Where the panel is focusing on specific issues, additional criteria can be applied. The citizens' jury in Oxford, for example, lists 'concern about climate change' among its criteria (Global Centre on Healthcare and Urbanisation 2022). In the majority of examples, those wanting to join the panel must be 18 years old or older (see, for example, Essex County Council 2021; Nottinghamshire County Council 2023; Surrey County Council 2022; Woking Borough Council 2023). Cardiff Council can be seen as an exemplary exception in this regard by having additionally installed the Children and Young People's Citizens' Panel (Cardiff Council 2023).

There is considerable diversity in relation to the renewal time of membership operated by various councils. Woking Borough Council, for example, allows active members potentially to serve indefinitely on the residents' panel, while non-response to two consecutive surveys will result in the council reaching out to check whether that specific citizen still wants to be a part of the panel (Woking Borough Council 2023). Cardiff Council 'refreshes' the council after five years (Cardiff

Council 2023) and Barnet Council ‘continually refreshes’ its citizens’ panels membership (Barnet Council 2023). As reflected in the main report above, some councils, such as the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and Woking Borough Council, also run incentive schemes consisting of price draws and/or charity contributions and travel costs for in-person events are generally reimbursed (Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea 2023; Woking Borough Council 2023).

Panel members are normally consulted a few times per year, predominantly through online or postal surveys, although most councils also include the possibility of occasionally conducting different forms of consultation, such as telephone or one-off-surveys, focus or discussion groups, workshops and forums (see, for example, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council 2023; Essex County Council 2021; Reading Borough Council 2023; Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea 2023; Surrey Heath Borough Council 2023). Increasingly, this form of consultation relies on online tools. An example of this can be found in Reading Borough Council’s online citizens’ panel which has been running since 2017 (Reading Borough Council 2023).

According to the LGA, online engagement provides many advantages, such as cost-efficiency and the ability to reach a larger pool of people, but also comes with certain risks. It is likely that problems to access these online forms of engagement correlate with other factors, such as belonging to a vulnerable group or one less well connected to or comfortable using the internet. Relying solely on online solutions therefore runs the risk of those people ending up on the panel having similar underlying characteristics (Local Government Association 2019a, pp. 86-87). According to Georgia Gould, leader of Camden Council, online platforms can thus turn out to be “[...] another space for those who are already very involved to discuss” (Gould & Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2019, p. 49). The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea tries to mitigate these risks by providing the option of offline participation through a paper survey (Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea 2023). In addition to that, according to Ipsos MORI (2021, p. 8), the assumption that online engagement can save money, often does not hold true in practice.

### **Specific purposes and applications of local government deliberative consultations**

Different examples show how the panels give citizens the chance to influence decision-making processes in the council decisively. Reading Borough Council, for example, conducted a citizens’ panel survey in November 2018, which showed that more than 50% of the respondents saw ‘better roads and pavements’ as one of their top priorities for improvement. The council responded to this result by initiating the biggest resurfacing programme it had ever undertaken (Reading Borough

Council 2020). In The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the citizens' panel was particularly successful in initiating changes regarding the borough's environmental policies. The changes resulting from the consultation of the panel included plans for the introduction of a new food waste collection, the planting of more wildflower areas and plans to set up an 'Environmental Coalition' comprising different stakeholders such as residents, community leaders but also key businesses and institution (Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea 2021). In the past, Guildford Borough Council has consulted its citizens' panel on topics such as community safety and engagement or the Local Council Tax Support Scheme (Guildford Borough Council 2023).

As indicated in the main report above, a recurring issue, however, is that the establishment of citizens' panels can be very resource intensive. Georgia Gould described how, on the one hand, it is very important to remunerate participants for their time in order to support them and show that their time and input are being valued (Gould & Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2019, p. 44, 48). On the other, however, this requires resources and adds to the costs already caused by the administrative effort surrounding the establishment of a citizens' panel.

In an interview with a senior representative of Tandridge District Council, it became clear that resource intensiveness is one of the challenges which ultimately led the Council to abolish their citizens' panel. Additionally, it was stated that the Council did not have enough issues on which to consult the panel members more frequently than once per annum, which led to members forgetting that they were on the panel, non-responses and attrition. Consequently, new members had to be recruited that matched the 'lost' members in the respective demographics, which led to the need for additional resources. This led Tandridge District Council to give up on the citizens' panel and to return to postal surveys, which were described as the most cost-effective engagement mechanism.

Resources not only play a role in the initial establishment of the citizens' panel but also influence what the council can do in response to recommendations by the panel. It is therefore important for the council to be transparent about resource constraints and communicate this alongside other necessary information relating to the panel's scope, remit and terms of reference, both to the panel members themselves and to the wider population. This is vital for expectations management and will help panel members understand the matters discussed, the council's priorities and the actual process. In this regard, potential knowledge imbalances among both panel members and the wider population need to be taken into account.

By communicating these aspects clearly, Runnymede Borough Council's (RBC's) proposed citizens' panel provides the chance to include the local population in decision-making processes related to

the key competencies of the Council, such as household waste and recycling collection; home insulation and energy efficiency, town centre regeneration; green space and public amenities, blue-green infrastructure and the 'wicked challenge' of tackling climate change and promoting resilience. In its Empowering our Communities Strategy, RBC has declared seven priorities (Runnymede Borough Council 2022, p. 5). The points discussed above demonstrate that the first two – 'evidence-based decision making' and 'listening to our residents' – can be directly positively influenced by means of a clearly constituted and engaged citizens' panel.

To ensure that the citizens' panel lives up to its potential and does not disproportionately recruit those who are intrinsically motivated and easy to engage anyway, it is important that existing data on the demographic make-up of the borough are used to weight the membership of the panel appropriately (Local Government Association 2019a, pp. 76-77). Failure to do this would result in the panel potentially being unrepresentative and could lead to poor decisions and wasting valuable resources. According to the LGA, criteria that could be taken into consideration are age, ethnicity, gender and LGBTQIA+ status, disability, income, religion/faith and location (Local Government Association 2019a, pp. 76-77).

## Annex 2

### Sample Focus Groups to Gauge RBC Residents' Perceptions

In order to gauge perceptions about different consultative processes and mechanisms, a non-representative sample of four focus group discussions were conducted with different sets of residents and civil society organisations in and around Egham and Englefield Green. These were identified in an effort to include as diverse a set of demographic and related characteristics as practicable. The participants were first asked about their knowledge about Runnymede Borough Council, its responsibilities and activities. Subsequently, questions focused on whether participants had been asked for their opinion by the Council before, what forms those engagements took and what they were about. Participants were then briefly introduced to the Council's strategy and responsibilities. Building on this, the participants were then asked what areas and issues they were particularly interested in and what forms of engagement they would prefer.

Most participants described their *knowledge* about the Council and its activities as rather limited. This was the case across different age groups, apart from one focus groups with parents aged between 30 and 45, in which participants thought they knew quite a lot about what the Council does. When asked about the specific areas under the Council's responsibility, most participants could name at least a few topics. These included, for example, parking, rubbish collection, planning, community activities and local elections.

One central issue that came up in this context was that of *communication*. Most participants agreed that the Council does not successfully communicate what it is working on, what issues tax money is used for and who is responsible for different areas. Some participants additionally criticised that the information material given out by the Council is often not accessible for everyone. For example, bright leaflets, especially when they use bright coloured text on a different, but similarly bright coloured background is not readable for people with certain visual impairments.

When asked about whether they had been asked about their opinion by the Council before, only the minority of focus group participants affirmed that this had been the case. Most forms of *engagement* that were encountered, were one-off surveys, for example after filling out a tax-related document online or after a repair in council housing. Other participants described how they had engaged after receiving surveys and information by post. They were disappointed, however, that they did not get any response to their engagement. Most participants stated that they had never

been consulted by the Council. *One participant summarised that she spent her whole life – 96 years – in Egham and has not once been asked about her opinion.*

In terms of the potential topics on which participants would want to provide input, some could be described as *everyday issues*, such as parking and grass cutting. A second, large group of responses could be described as community activities and a feeling of ‘togetherness’. This topic reached from the lack of community activities for children and high rents for non-for-profit organisations to the role of university students in the local community and to community-centred activities more broadly. Climate change and the environment particularly played a role for younger participants (i.e., students), especially in relation to the protection and maintenance of green spaces, but also in relation to the Council’s activity in this area more broadly. Other participants were especially interested local issues related to this topic, such as rubbish, recycling, pollution and grass cutting.

In terms of the different forms of engagement, there did not seem to be a common denominator among the different participant categories. Most agreed that the appropriate form of engagement is context dependent, and that both in-person and online engagement options have their advantages and disadvantages. In addition to that, they also agreed that surveys work better for some topics, while a more in-depth engagement and personal contact is more important for others. Regarding the different forms of surveys available, online surveys seem to be the preferred option for most, albeit not all, participants. Older participants agreed that while they understand that ‘online is just how it is today’, this would hinder them from participating. Telephone surveys were often seen as putting pressure on the participants and not leaving enough time to think about the question, while postal surveys were often perceived as problematic especially for illiterate residents or those with visual impairments. While some participants favoured online engagement options due to their flexibility and accessibility, others criticised them as impersonal and harder to access for some.

In general, all participants showed a high willingness to participate both in surveys and more in-depth exercises, such as focus groups, workshops or forums. They were keen to hear more from the Council, have a better knowledge of where their taxes are going and engage with other residents. By some, however, online and postal surveys in the past were seen as a token exercise and those residents felt like the decision had already been made before they were consulted, rendering their participation meaningless. This made them conclude that their time was spent better on other things. Others repeatedly asked about the effect of their participation, i.e., they were wondering if it would actually influence the decisions made by the Council. To summarise, *most participants were very willing to participate, but were also very keen on their participation being meaningful.*

## Annex 3

### Local Demographic Characteristics and Suggestions for the RBC Recruitment Process

From the existing literature and local examples of consultation, it can be deduced that a citizens' panel or assembly should reflect the demographic makeup of the broader population it is representing to ensure that minority groups are adequately represented, and existing biases are not reinforced. When looking at the proposed panel size of 900 individuals for Runnymede Borough Council, this means that the 2021 Census data can give a good indication of how the citizens' panel should be structured. Detailed ward-level data are contained in the *Local Insight* policy briefs from the 2021 Census for Surrey County Council by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) (<https://local.communityinsight.org/>) in the possession of RBC. These provide invaluable insights for all ward councillors as well as officials.

According to these data, achieving gender parity should be the first goal when recruiting panel members. One noteworthy limitation of the ONS data is the absence of information on non-binary gender identity. Unless the gap can be filled from other sources, this could inhibit the ability to address issues affecting LGBTQI+ groups.

The Council should also take into account the age distribution in the borough. As more than a quarter of all residents fall into the 20-40 age category, for example, the panel should comprise at least 25% of members of this group. More than 15% of the population is aged 65 and over, so it would be advisable that this is also considered in the recruitment process.

As over 15% of the population is non-white, the panel should be made up of at least 15% of non-white residents. In addition to that, 20% of the residents in Runnymede were not born in the UK. These aspects should be considered alongside other characteristics, such as the proportion of people considered disabled under the Equality Act (15%) and the proportions of the different religions present in the borough, when recruiting members.

Additionally, the Council should also take into account the different socio-economic circumstances present among the population. It should also be taken into consideration that more than 45% of the households in Runnymede are deprived in at least one dimension. Nonetheless, more than two thirds of the residents own their house outright or with a mortgage, loan or shared ownership. These dynamics should be considered during the recruitment process. Additionally, as 12.9% of Runnymede's residents are social tenants and 8% live in property rented from the Council, they

should be adequately represented in the panel. A minimum of 10% of social tenants among the members of the citizens' panel could be imagined.

To ensure equal representation of the different wards and an appropriate geographical spread, it would be advisable that at least 45 people (5%) are recruited from each ward. Another aspect that should be taken into consideration in this regard, especially concerning specific ward-focused consultations, are the particularities of the different wards. Thorpe, for example, is home to the largest proportion of older residents (aged 65 and over) (approx. 25 %). In Virginia Water, the proportion of people born outside the UK is about 10 percentage points higher than the average for Runnymede (above 30% rather than around 20%).

The demographic makeup of Egham Town, Englefield Green East, and Englefield Green West is decidedly impacted by Royal Holloway (RHUL) being located in the area. While the influence is most pronounced in Englefield Green East, the other two wards are also influenced by it. This is not only reflected in a high proportion of full-time students (27.9 %, 63.7 % and 32.4% respectively, compared to the Runnymede average of 13.4%) and the correspondingly increased proportion of people aged between 15 and 24 (27.3%, 58.5% and 31.4 %), but also in a higher rate of those living in privately rented property (36.0%, 32.3% and 28.4%). Additionally, in Englefield Green, a higher rate of non-white residents (28.1% compared to 16.5%), especially those of Asian descent (17.2% compared to the average of 9.2%) can be found.

The proportion of social tenants is significantly higher than the average for Runnymede (12.9%) in Chertsey St. Ann's (21%; 15.7% rented from Council) and Egham Hythe (23.7%; 18.0% rented from Council) and more than double in Englefield Green West (27.8%; 16.3% rented from Council). The proportion of those owning their property outright is significantly greater than the Runnymede average of 32.8% in Thorpe (52.2%), Virginia Water (40.8%) and Woodham and Rowtown (44.0%), while these wards also have the highest mean property values (£653,679; £2,261,383; £598,293) and percentages of properties in the highest Council Tax bands (32.9%; 60.1%; 34.6%).