

Report to Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

29 January 2025

Subject:	Consultation and Engagement Activity
Director:	Assistant Chief Executive James McLaughlin
Contact Officer:	Sarah Sprung, Senior Lead Officer

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That the Board considers and comments upon the infrastructure adopted for consultation and engagement with stakeholders.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 At the meeting of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board held on 3 October 2024 it was requested that a report be brought forward on consultation and engagement activity.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

Growing Up in Sandwell	Consultation and engagement activity should actively contribute to decision making across all areas of our Council Plan.
Living in Sandwell	
Thriving Economy in Sandwell	
Healthy in Sandwell	
One Council One Team	

4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 A key element of the Council's Improvement Plan was to deliver improvements to resident consultation and engagement, with the LGA noting in their Peer Challenge of 2022 that the Council needed to 'glean a wider range of perceptions and insights to inform plans and prioritisation.'
- 4.2 In response to this recommendation an Officer Working Group was established, made up of officers from each directorate. The Working Group mapped out existing methods of consultation and engagement across the Council and conducted comprehensive research into best practice.
- 4.1 The mapping activity highlighted that there was an inconsistent approach to consultation activity, inconsistent collection of demographic data, duplication and missed opportunities to share findings.
- 4.3 Best practice research found that a number of Local Authorities used Citizenspace, or similar platforms to great effect. The main benefits being:-

Enhanced Public Engagement

- **Wider Reach:** CitizenSpace enables organisations to engage a broader demographic, including those who may not typically participate in traditional in-person consultations (e.g., working professionals or individuals with mobility challenges).
- **Accessibility:** The platform is available online 24/7, allowing respondents to participate at their convenience, which has led to increased response rates compared to previous consultation methods.
- **Targeted Engagement:** The platform allows organisations to target specific communities or demographic groups based on geographic location, age, or other factors, resulting in more relevant and representative responses.

Improved Efficiency in Consultation Processes

- **Streamlined Process:** The setup of consultations on CitizenSpace is significantly more streamlined than traditional paper-based or email-based systems. This reduces the administrative burden on staff and improved the speed of data collection.
- **Automated Analysis:** CitizenSpace offers tools for analysing responses automatically, providing instant reports and insights that save time compared to manually reviewing responses.

Greater Transparency and Accountability

- **Public Visibility:** CitizenSpace provides a public-facing platform where consultation results are posted and can be accessed by anyone. This fosters a greater sense of transparency as the community can see how their feedback is being used to inform decision-making.
- **Feedback Loop:** The platform allows the council to publish “You Said, We Did” reports, directly addressing how public input has influenced council policies and decisions, which builds trust within the community.
- **Auditability:** As all consultation data is stored securely within the system, it is easy to track who provided feedback, when, and on what topic, which ensures a high level of accountability.

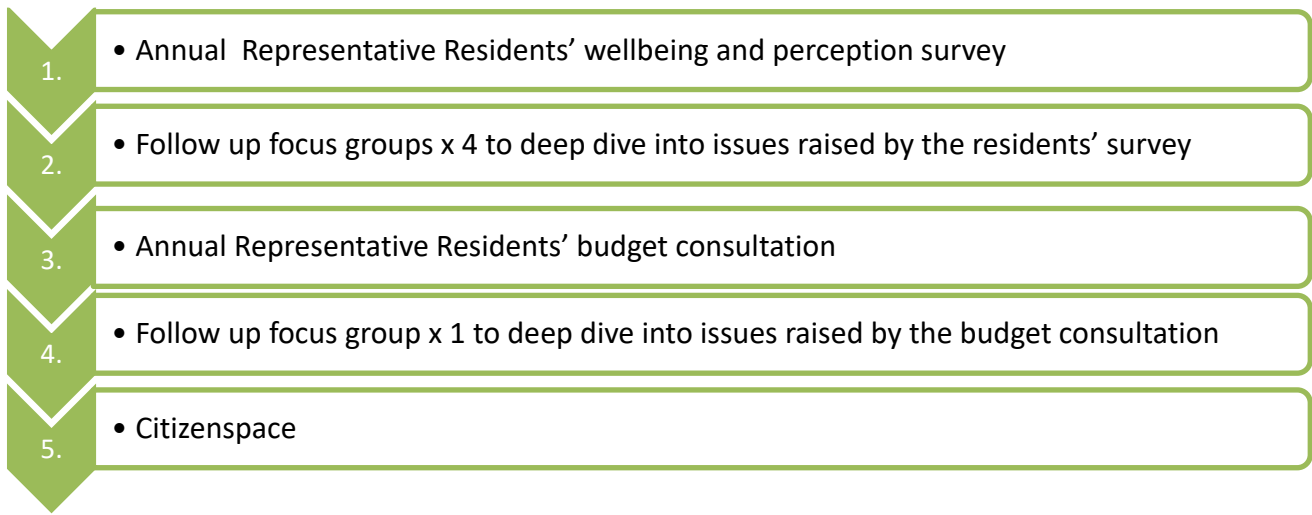
Better Decision-Making

- **Informed Policy Making:** CitizenSpace allows organisations to gather a wide range of opinions from a diverse set of stakeholders, which leads to more informed and balanced decision-making.
- **Real-Time Feedback:** The ability to track responses in real-time enables quicker adjustments to consultations, ensuring relevant feedback when needed most.

User Experience and Engagement

- **Simplified Surveys:** The user-friendly design of CitizenSpace allows organisations and respondents to navigate the system easily, ensuring that consultations are accessible to all stakeholders, regardless of technical ability.
- **Customizable Surveys:** The platform's flexibility allows Sandwell Council to tailor surveys to the specific needs of each consultation, from multiple-choice questions to open-ended responses, ensuring the collection of rich and varied data.

4.4 The outcome of this work was an options appraisal, which was presented to Leadership Team in November 2022. Leadership Team approved the following:



Consultation and Engagement Activity 2023 to 2024

- 4.5 An external provider was procured to deliver the representative resident survey, budget consultation, and focus groups. Intelligence generated from these surveys directly contributes to the development of directorate business plans and the budget setting process. These surveys are conducted annually and timed to ensure that data is available to inform the business planning process and budget setting.
- 4.6 In relation to citizenspace, the council's platform went live on 1 April 2023, with Leadership noting that it would have the following benefits:
- Corporate oversight of activity,
 - Mitigate reputational risks and saturation/duplication,
 - Improve intelligence gathering and usage,
 - Improve quality and consistency of capturing the voice of the resident/service user (including staff and members),
 - Close the feedback loop,
 - More efficient practice through forward planning and alignment of activities.
- 4.7 Since adoption over 300 staff have attended awareness and overview sessions with over 100 staff fully trained and using the site.
- 4.8 Between 1 April 2023 and 1 December 2024:-
- 11,139 individual surveys completed.
 - Across 145 surveys.
 - Generated across all directorates within the Council.

4.9 The top four surveys in terms of the number of responses are:-

- Budget consultation 2024 – 1575 responses.
- Play Satisfaction Survey for Children & Young People – 1525 responses.
- Managing Litter in Sandwell – 907 responses.
- Sandwell Open Spaces Assessment Survey – 784 responses.

4.10 We have formed a Citizenspace User Group to support staff using the platform, share ideas and good practice as well as to get feedback on the site. From the feedback received so far, we know that: -

- Citizenspace is greatly valued by those who use it.
- It is easy to deploy and produces quality intelligence.

4.11 Whilst Citizenspace is an online platform it is possible to print off paper copies of surveys to ensure that those who may be digitally excluded are able to participate. For example, when the Council was considering going cashless, paper copies of the survey were handed to all residents paying by cash at the Council House, ensuring that those who would be impacted were able to take part in the consultation.

4.10 Where a survey may relate to a particular site, posters can be put up detailing the consultation together with a QR code to access the survey, ensuring that residents who use the site will be able to put their views forward. This method was used at Sandwell Valley.

4.11 We can also work with libraries and local community groups to promote surveys and ensure reach.

Principles and Standards

4.12 To underpin all of our consultation and engagement activity Leadership Team requested that a corporate set of Standards and Principles be developed as a single blueprint for how all areas of the council approach consultation and engagement activity.

4.13 The Corporate Working Group, including representatives from Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, developed the Standards and Principles. These were adopted in June 2023 and were subsequently promoted across the Council. A copy of the standards can be found at Appendix A.

5 Implications

Resources:	All consultation and engagement activity is delivered within existing resource.
Legal and Governance:	A full data protection impact assessment was undertaken prior to the implementation of Citizenspace.
Risk:	To ensure that all surveys collect consistent demographic data, to avoid duplication and to ensure quality, all surveys are checked by officers in Corporate Communications or Service Improvement. It is not possible to send any activity live without consent.
Equality:	The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team have been involved in all aspects of activity relating to consultation and engagement.
Health and Wellbeing:	Both the resident survey and surveys on Citizenspace contribute to the intelligence we have on the health and wellbeing of the local population.
Social Value:	Citizenspace can help to inform policies and initiatives, ensuring that they reflect the views and opinions of residents.
Climate Change:	Citizenspace can help to inform policies and initiatives, ensuring that they reflect the views and opinions of residents.
Corporate Parenting:	Citizenspace can help to inform policies and initiatives, ensuring that they reflect the views and opinions of residents.

6 Appendices

Appendix A – Principles and Standards of Consultation and Engagement.