

# Appendix B: Summary, Council Plan 2024-25 Engagement

## Introduction

Following the change of administration after the May 2023 local elections it was considered appropriate to review the Council's aims and priorities as expressed in the Corporate Plan, developed in 2021. The public engagement around the development of the 2021-26 Corporate Plan took the form of a public consultation, held in early 2022, which sought the public's agreement on the proposed headline commitments and objectives.

The development process for the 2024-2027 Council Plan (previously referred to as Corporate Plan) sought to undertake internal and external engagement that was broader than that carried out for the previous Corporate Plan and took place at an earlier stage. This enabled a wider range of stakeholders to have greater opportunity for input into the council's emerging aims and priorities. The challenging financial situation of the council makes effective engagement, and the enhanced insights and stakeholder buy-in associated with that, especially important for this Council Plan.

A series of separate engagement activities and events were carried out involving a range of stakeholders:

- 9-13<sup>th</sup> October 2023: Community (including residents and VCS organisations)
- 5-13<sup>th</sup> December 2023: internal colleagues (including Achieving for Children and Optalis)
- 11-12<sup>th</sup> December 2023: elected members
- 11<sup>th</sup> December 2023: parish councils

As the community engagement took place first, the Council Plan was at a more incipient stage and so the information presented to participants focused on the council's financial situation and the broader priorities for the council and borough. Discussions then took place in small groups on topics of interest that were relevant to each stakeholder group, and which aligned with the broad themes emerging within the Council Plan. For the later sessions held with staff, elected members and parishes, it was possible to share a draft of the aims and priorities for the Council Plan and for discussion to focus more on the proposed structure and content. Although formal early engagement did not take place with these latter groups, ongoing conversations with the Cabinet and with colleagues ensured that their priorities and focus areas were taken into consideration in the development of those aims and priorities.

## Summary of Engagement Sessions

### Community engagement

Four in-person engagement sessions were planned, targeting specific groups of stakeholders: young people (aged 12-18, up to 25 years for care leavers); older adults (65+) and people with disabilities; voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations; and local businesses. These groups were chosen to represent a range of community stakeholders with different interests within the borough. The two 'resident-focused' sessions targeted demographic groups that are most likely to be in touch with the services which account for most of the council's budget (Adults and Children's Services) and that have the most potential to be affected by changes in budget allocation and service delivery. There was insufficient interest for the in-person business session to go ahead so this was replaced by an online survey, promoted through the Chamber of Commerce. Excluding current councillors and officers, there were 16 participants at the older and disabled people's

session, 19 at the VCS session, and 8 at the young people's session (with an additional 10 having attended an initial planning session to identify relevant discussion topics).

Alongside the in-person discussion sessions, a Facilitation Pack was created which contained information and resources to enable community groups and residents to run their own discussion session and to feedback their comments for inclusion with the feedback from the council-run sessions via an online survey. This approach was intended to increase the reach of this engagement and to make it more inclusive. Three additional groups provided feedback in this way.

### Staff engagement

Three sessions were held for staff members, which were open to colleagues from RBWM, AfC and Optalis. To maximise participation, two of these were online (with one promoted particularly to colleagues resident in the borough) and one was held as an in-person session in the Town Hall. Attendance across the sessions was good, with a total of 127 colleagues participating and all three organisations represented.

### Councillor engagement

Two online sessions were held for elected members of the council. There was good attendance from councillors, with a total of 28 attending the sessions.

### Parish Council engagement

One session was held for Parish Councils with 16 Parish Councillors attending.

### Community engagement feedback on local area

Participants at the community engagement sessions were invited to share what they felt were the strengths of the borough and what were the main challenges and areas for improvement.

#### Strengths of the local area

Some strengths were mentioned in all three in-person sessions:

- the location of the borough, particularly in terms of its connectivity and access to green spaces;
- the safety of the local area;
- local facilities, such as the libraries.

The strength and potential of the local voluntary sector came through strongly, although this is unsurprising considering the number of participants who were involved in the VCS. The relative affluence of the area was mentioned in several comments relating to residents' general health and wellbeing. This also fed into expressions of community cohesion, highlighting the sharing of community spaces and the willingness of people to look after those less well off.

#### Areas for improvement

From the in-person and online feedback received from the community engagement some issues were consistently mentioned as areas for improvement:

- Travel and transport
- Communication and engagement
- Community facilities
- Maidenhead town centre

## Feedback on Council Plan themes

### General feedback

There was overall agreement across the engagement sessions that the emerging aims and priorities were appropriate and reflected the direction that the council should be taking. Several participants in different sessions noted that without having more detail about the activities, metrics and timescales that would underlie the aims, it was difficult to provide as much feedback as they would like. Participants were keen to understand how the aims would translate into measurable actions and how residents could hold us to account.

### Structure and language of the Plan

There was discussion about the importance of highlighting the co-benefits of the different aims and priorities, and how best to reflect areas of work which span more than one aim. This also linked in with comments about the importance of moving away from the practice, or perception, or silo working.

Some suggestions were made about refining the wording of certain aims, in particular the reference to 'resilient neighbourhoods' (Aim 3). However, overall it was felt that the language and wording of the aims and priorities were acceptable and understandable for the council and its residents.

### Communication and engagement

A desire for better communication and engagement by the council (Aim 4 in the version shared) was a key theme for stakeholders in all sessions. From a community perspective, there were comments about the sharing of information and responsiveness to communication from council officers and members. Potential improvements in the council's communication and engagement of specific groups of residents, namely young people and people with learning disabilities, were also discussed.

There was a general feeling from internal and external stakeholders that the council should undertake engagement which is more representative and inclusive of the diversity within the borough and which enables a broader range of residents and stakeholders to inform council decision-making. Community engagement and local volunteering were identified as opportunities for building a sense of community and strengthening residents' feeling of responsibility and ownership for their local areas. More effective engagement and communication with partners was also highlighted as a key aspect in strengthening our approach to partnership working.

There was also an acknowledgement of the importance of the communication and engagement around the ongoing development of the Council Plan, and in particular the need to 'close the feedback loop' with stakeholders who have been involved in the process so far. There was discussion about how the Council Plan is presented to residents and what the narrative is, particular in terms of relevance to residents who are not in more vulnerable groups and so are not currently in touch with higher-need council services.

### Maidenhead town centre

A common theme with residents, as reflected in the staff sessions and in the community sessions, was a concern about the changing character of Maidenhead town centre. This was expressed as a reduction in the sense of pride in the town, the absence of 'destination' shops/venues in the town and a perception of a lack of a coordinated vision for recent development works. Concerns were also raised over the capacity of existing (and planned) infrastructure to support the increased demands from new developments. A suggestion was made to involve residents more through the coproduction of a town plan. It is worth noting that the focus on Maidenhead may reflect the fact that the in-person community engagement sessions were all held in Maidenhead (although involved participants from across the borough) and that the location of the main council offices at Maidenhead Town Hall may have resulted in a greater number of Maidenhead residents amongst the participants at the staff sessions. Discussion of how 'clean and green' the borough was prompted comments about littering, graffiti and poor maintenance of public spaces.

### Travel and transport

Travel and transport (and the infrastructure to support it) came across as a key priority in the community engagement sessions. Discussion focused primarily on dissatisfaction with public transport and active travel provision, including the accessibility of pavements. Some specific travel issues were mentioned, such as children travelling to school, bus transport in rural areas, and poor public transport services to key community assets such as Norden Farm. Car parking was also mentioned as an area to improve.

### Local facilities

Local assets and facilities including the libraries, heritage assets and community spaces were highlighted in the community sessions as strengths of the borough. However, this was coupled with a concern for the future of libraries and community facilities in particular and discussions about the lack of facilities and spaces that cater to young people and to older adults who want places to meet and engage with others. This feeling that there should be more focus on the needs of these particular demographic groups, especially as the borough has an ageing population, featured in more general comments as well.

### Other areas to include in Council Plan

The sharing of the draft aims and priorities at the sessions with staff, elected members and parishes enabled a discussion of whether certain topics and service areas were underrepresented in the Council Plan. One issue raised was that business and the local economy did not feature as prominently as it might and that there was also no consideration of benefits to visitors to the borough. A similar point was also made about aims and priorities around children and young people, beyond the council's role as Corporate Parent, and around adult statutory services.

### Changes to the Council Plan following this engagement

As a result of these engagement activities and the feedback received, a number of amendments have been made to the draft aims and priorities:

- The original Aim 3 previously related to services supporting both children and adults. This has now been expanded into two aims: Aim 3 which focuses on children and young people and is aligned with the priorities of AfC, who deliver this service; and Aim 4, which focuses on adults.
- Aim 5 (formerly Aim 4), 'a high-performing council that delivers for the borough', now includes strengthening accountability and transparency in response to feedback from a number of sessions.
- Aim 4 (formerly Aim 3) has been changed from 'People live healthy and independent lives in inclusive and resilient neighbourhoods' to 'People live healthy and independent lives in supportive communities', responding to feedback on the term 'resilient neighbourhoods'.
- The priorities under Aim 5 have been expanded to include reference to working with business.
- The process has been adapted to enable Corporate Overview and Scrutiny to review the KPI and Deliverables Technical Appendix in March. The full Council Plan, including the Technical Appendix, will be agreed at Full Council in April.