



Draft Consultation and Engagement Strategy

Early engagement feedback

1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to summarise the findings from the early engagement activities undertaken to inform the development of the council's draft Consultation and Engagement Strategy.

These activities sought to gather valuable insights and feedback from stakeholders, enabling a deeper understanding of community needs, priorities and expectations.

The need for a consistent and strategic approach to engagement has been highlighted in previous consultations. Recognising this; and in line with the new Corporate Plan in 2024, which prioritises partnership-working and collaboration, the development of this strategy became a key focus.

Engaging communities and stakeholders from the outset aligns with council's ambitions for administration and underscores its commitment to meaningful co-production.

This report provides a detailed analysis of the three main components of the early engagement phase:

- **Pulse survey findings** – a mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis based on concise, targeted survey responses to gather broad yet meaningful feedback.
- **Workshop feedback** – rich qualitative insights derived from interactive sessions with a wide range of stakeholders, capturing in-depth perspectives and actionable ideas.
- **Social media comments** – thematic analysis of community feedback shared through online conversations, revealing public sentiment and emerging trends.

This phase also marks a shift in the council's engagement approach. Agile and accessible methods, such as the use of a pulse survey and tailored communication strategies, were introduced to reach a wider audience and encourage greater participation. These innovations reflect the council's commitment to evolving its practices to better meet the needs of its diverse communities.

By consolidating these findings and evaluating the methodologies used, this report not only informs the development of a robust and inclusive Consultation and Engagement Strategy but also helps ensure it is grounded in the voices of our residents and stakeholders.

2. Executive summary

- Early engagement combined insights from a pilot pulse survey, stakeholder workshops and social media feedback, reaching diverse audiences and revealing key areas for strategic focus.
- Its purpose was to:
 - gather resident and stakeholder feedback on current engagement practices, barriers to engagement and suggestions for improvement
 - test and evaluate a new, dynamic engagement approach using digital and traditional methods.
- **Strengths identified:**
 - Survey respondents recognised diverse feedback channels and timely, clear information as current strengths.
 - Workshop sessions highlighted the value of face-to-face engagement, particularly for addressing digital exclusion and other accessibility needs.
 - Social media feedback expressed support for the council's growing efforts to commit to getting engagement right.
- **Barriers to engagement:**
 - Lack of trust: widespread scepticism about whether feedback influences decisions.
 - Access and inclusion: physical and cognitive accessibility and unclear communication.
 - Low awareness: approximately 60% of survey respondents cited a lack of awareness of engagement opportunities as a key barrier.
- **Opportunities for improvement:**
 - Transparency: participants across all channels called for visible follow-ups showing how feedback shapes decisions.
 - Inclusive approaches: tailored outreach for underrepresented groups; including young people, minority communities and digitally excluded individuals.
 - Simplified communication: avoiding jargon, pre-testing materials using plain language to increase engagement.
 - Innovative methods: suggested formats include pulse surveys, community workshops and hybrid approaches (in-person and online).
- This phase highlights key strategic priorities, including engaging early, being inclusive, improving accessibility, building trust and adopting ongoing engagement.

3. Methodology

Early engagement took place between August and November 2024.

A significant change was made to the consultation and engagement process during this phase to enhance accessibility, broaden participation and ensure a more responsive collection of feedback.

Traditional methods were replaced with a more agile approach, including:

- a pulse survey designed to capture concise and actionable input.
- interactive workshop sessions designed to gather detailed qualitative insights through discussion and collaboration.
- social media engagement to gather organic feedback in real time.
- voucher incentives to encourage participation
- targeted communication in specific areas such as leisure centres and coastal towns through poster/flyer drops and other localised efforts with community groups.

These methods were supported by a revised communications strategy aimed at driving awareness and participation across diverse stakeholder groups.

3.1. Pulse survey

The pilot pulse survey was introduced to incentivise greater resident engagement, broaden the council's reach and capture real-time feedback. It was designed to inform the draft Consultation and Engagement Strategy by exploring:

- what the council does well in engaging and consulting with residents
- barriers residents face in participating in engagement activities
- suggestions for specific improvements to engagement processes.

Survey design

The survey consisted of three core questions, each allowing for multiple-choice responses and qualitative feedback via an open-ended 'Other, please specify' option. To ensure a diverse respondent pool, additional diversity monitoring questions were included at the end.

Distribution

A multi-platform approach was used to promote the survey, incorporating both traditional and digital communication tactics:

- **Social media platforms:**
 - Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter)
 - Organic posts and a two-week paid Facebook ad campaign (13–27 September) boosted visibility
 - Instagram reels, incorporating humour, were used to target younger audiences.
- **Direct emails:** the survey was shared directly with a wide range of stakeholders and community groups.
- **Community newsletters:** QR codes linked to the survey were included in newsletters distributed by the council and partner organisations, such as Canterbury Business Improvement District (BID) and Social Enterprise Kent (SEK).
- **Posters/flyers:** displayed in targeted locations such as leisure centres to reach younger demographics as part of a trial of targeted communications.

Survey reach

The survey received 274 responses, providing valuable insights into community perceptions and preferences. Key demographic highlights include:

- **Age breakdown:** respondents aged 55–74 represented the largest group, making up 44.2% of the total. Engagement from those under 35 was lower, comprising 11.7% of respondents.
- **Postcode representation:** the areas of CT6, CT1, and CT5 were the most represented, accounting for nearly 69% of all responses.

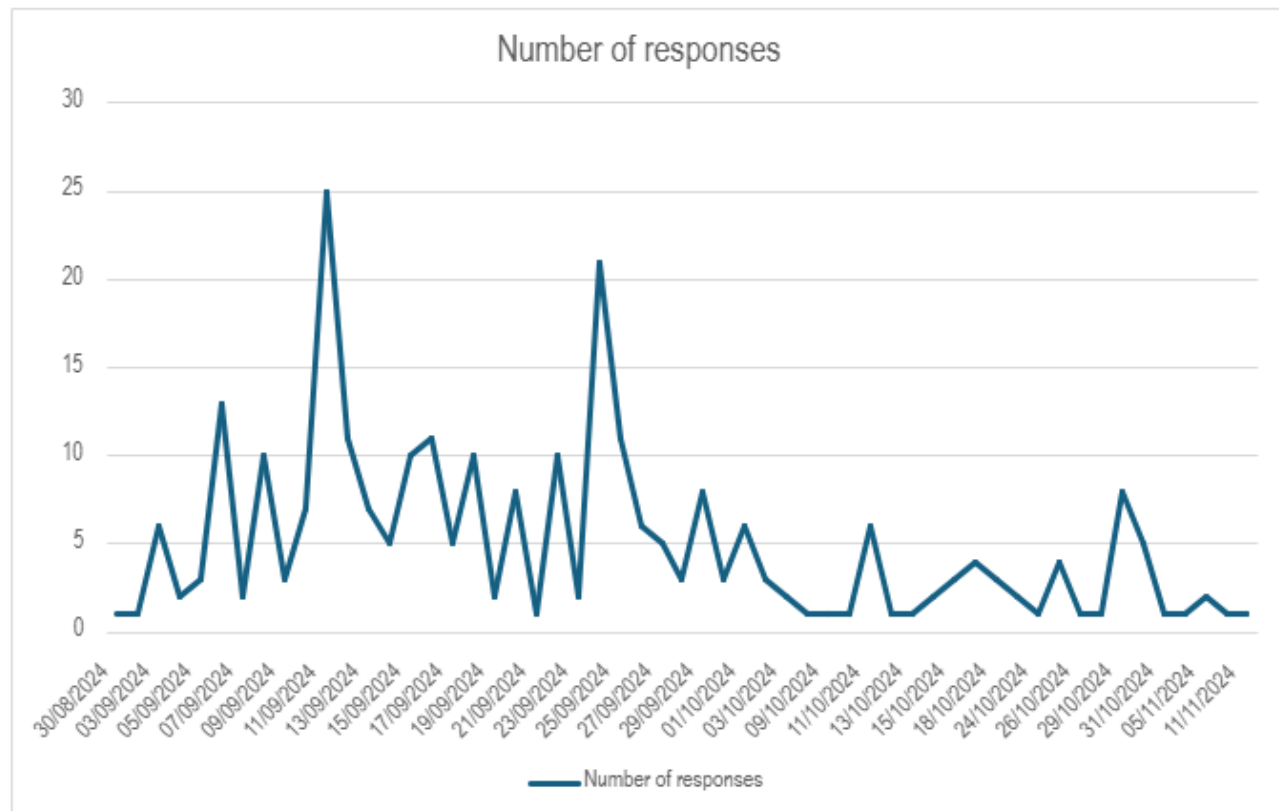
Response trends over time

The graph below illustrates the response rate over the survey period, reflecting the impact of different distribution methods and promotional efforts (e.g., the two-week paid Facebook ad campaign).

- **6 September:** A noticeable jump in responses (13) occurred following an organic Facebook post, suggesting that initial engagement activity had an immediate but short-term impact.
- **13 September:** The largest daily response rate (25) occurred after a Facebook post was shared in local residents' groups, following the start of the two-week paid ad campaign. This period (13-27 September) showed sustained engagement with responses consistently about 10 each day.
- **24 September:** A second peak in responses (21) was observed, potentially due to the continuation of the paid Facebook campaign or follow-up campaign posts.

While engagement slowed following the paid ad, responses still averaged at around 5-10 per day, showing that some momentum was maintained after efforts ceased.

This analysis highlights the significant impact of social media. Particularly, the combination of organic and paid activity in driving higher engagement during the survey period.



3.2. Workshops

Stakeholder and community workshops were conducted to facilitate in-depth discussions and elicit nuanced feedback from diverse groups.

Participants

The workshops engaged a range of stakeholders, including community members, representatives from statutory organisations, voluntary and community sector groups and individuals representing specific interests such as disability rights and student concerns. A total of eight workshops were held with the following audiences:

- local societies (7 attendees)
- key statutory organisations (30 attendees)
- parish councils (20 attendees)
- voluntary and community sector (two sessions) (56 attendees across both sessions)
- Disability Forum (6 attendees)
- BeConnected Panel (8 attendees)
- student union representatives (4 attendees)

Format

Half of the workshops were held in person, while the other half were conducted online to maximise accessibility and participation.

Each workshop was tailored to its audience. Some sessions included overviews of the council's consultation and engagement processes, including how decisions are made. Others were clearer on differences between district council and county council responsibilities.

Like the survey, workshop discussions focused on three core topics:

- what we do well (or, what good engagement looks like)
- challenges and barriers to engagement
- how engagement processes can be improved.

Feedback collection

Feedback from all sessions was recorded and thematically analysed, using a consistent approach to the analysis of survey and social media data. This ensured that insights from the workshops were integrated into the broader findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder perspectives.

3.3. Social media engagement

A social media campaign was implemented throughout the entire engagement pulse survey period to drive community feedback on the council's engagement strategy.

This included both standard text posts and two types of reels to attract a wide range of respondents across platforms. This sustained, multi-platform approach was designed to maximise visibility and participation across key community demographics.

Facebook

- 2 organic posts: text-based posts that encouraged followers to share feedback in the comments.
- 1 paid ad: a targeted ad that ran for the full survey period, expanding reach to a broader local audience.

Instagram

- 3 organic posts: a mix of text posts and visually engaging reels designed to connect with a younger audience.

X/Twitter

- 2 organic posts: standard posts raising awareness of the survey and encouraging rapid participation.

Engagement metrics

- A total of 120 comments were received across Facebook and Instagram posts.
- The survey QR code was scanned 51 times.
- A noticeable increase in survey responses can be seen on days where Facebook posts were shared and when the paid ad went live.

Feedback

To analyse feedback, comments were reviewed thematically using a method similar to the qualitative survey feedback analysis. Each comment was assigned a theme to identify common issues, trends, and priorities raised by the community. This approach ensured that social media insights were integrated into the broader analysis framework.

4. Findings

NB: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest decimal point

4.1. Survey responses

4.1.1. Respondent profile

The survey received 274 responses, primarily from residents of Canterbury district (89%). A smaller proportion of respondents came from voluntary or community groups (5%), local businesses (2%), and councillors (2%).

A wide variety of community organisations were represented, totalling 1,600 individuals, showcasing strong community involvement. Local businesses and councillors also played a significant role in the consultation process.

Most respondents heard about the consultation through social media, particularly council Facebook posts (49%) and emails (23%). Other sources included word of mouth, flyers and parish/community networks. Qualitative comments highlighted how community engagement was supported through direct communication methods like newsletters, local events, and personal outreach.

Most respondents lived in CT6, CT1 and CT5 postcodes, with a balanced age distribution and gender representation. Specifically, age groups were well-represented, with the largest proportion falling within the 55 to 64 age range (23%). Younger age groups (18-34) made up 14% of responses.

Regarding disability, 16% of respondents identified as disabled, while 76% did not. This reflects a diverse level of accessibility and inclusion within the community.

4.1.2. What do you believe the council does well in terms of engaging and consulting with residents on plans, projects and proposals which are being developed?

Respondents noted several strengths in the council's engagement efforts, including providing various channels for feedback (35%), offering clear and timely information (30%) and actively seeking input from diverse community groups (18%).

However, transparency in decision-making (10%) and the effectiveness of feedback responses (10%) were identified as areas needing improvement.

Qualitative comments highlighted issues such as poor engagement (52 comments), ineffective feedback mechanisms and limited consultation opportunities. A summary of all 'Other' comments received from respondents is below:

- Does not engage well in any way: 52 comments
- Won't listen, poor response or feedback: 14 comments
- Unaware of consultations: 9 comments
- Poor communication: 7 comments
- Not enough time to respond: 4 comments
- Digital access problem: 2 comments
- Good social media communication: 2 comments
- Not enough consultation: 1 comment
- Good website: 1 comment
- Doesn't engage enough with minority community groups: 1 comment
- Some improvement in engagement observed: 1 comment
- Hard to understand content: 1 comment
- Corruption: 1 comment
- Survey structure issues: 1 comment

4.1.3. What challenges or barriers do you face that prevent you from participating in the council's consultation and engagement activities?

The primary barriers to participation were a lack of awareness about engagement opportunities (60%), perceived lack of impact of feedback (52%) and difficulty accessing information or meetings (32%).

Other common themes included unclear communication, digital exclusion and complex procedures.

Qualitative feedback highlighted concerns about unclear engagement opportunities, accessibility challenges and frustration with ineffective or non-responsive communication. A summary of all 'Other' comments received from respondents is below:

- Unclear communications: 4 comments
- No obvious challenges: 4 comments
- Disability/accessibility challenges: 3 comments
- Presentation of information: 3 comments
- Complexity of procedures: 2 comments
- Reliance on digital/digital exclusion: 2 comments
- Unclear engagement opportunities: 2 comments
- Too much information: 2 comments
- Dullness: 1 comment

- Perceived lack of impact: 1 comment
- Cllrs should share more info: 1 comment
- Survey fatigue: 1 comment
- Council does not listen/care: 1 comment
- Lack of effectiveness: 1 comment

4.1.4. What specific improvements would you like to see the council make in its engagement and consultation activities?

Respondents suggested a variety of improvements, with the most common being better promotion of engagement opportunities (61%), more frequent and varied communication methods (55%) and increased transparency in how feedback is used (50%). Accessibility for people with disabilities (26%) and providing real, visible results from feedback were also key areas for enhancement.

Additional comments included calls for personalised engagement, open-format consultations, and the use of newer technologies for more inclusive communication. A summary of all 'Other' comments received from respondents is below:

- Real results from feedback need to be seen: 10 comments
- More transparency regarding projects/decision making: 6 comments
- Clearer details provided for projects/policies: 5 comments
- Personal direct feedback given: 5 comments
- Listen to residents/the public over stakeholders/businesses: 5 comments
- Adopt newer technologies and make content more accessible (e.g. BSL for videos): 3 comments
- Short form pulse surveys are preferred: 2 comments
- Different style of meetings, open format, informal: 2 comments
- Wider community engagement needed: 2 comments
- More specific engagement for businesses, universities and residents: 2 comments
- Make content/information of policies available prior to consultations/meetings: 1 comment
- More direct, personalised engagement: 1 comment
- Open format questionnaires instead of designed: 1 comment

4.2. Workshop feedback

4.2.1. What we do well

Overall, attendees highlighted the council's openness to improvement, the value of face-to-face engagement and steps towards inclusivity through lived experiences and social media.

The following themes emerged from workshop discussions:

1. Openness and willingness to improve

Participants widely recognised the council's commitment to improving consultation and engagement processes. Parish councils appreciated the council's collaborative approach in tackling local challenges. Local societies praised efforts to build stronger communication channels and relationships with communities.

2. Face-to-face engagement

In-person engagement methods were consistently valued for their effectiveness, particularly for addressing accessibility barriers. Parish councils noted that face-to-face sessions were critical for engaging rural communities affected by digital exclusion. The tenant Disability Forum highlighted how tailored in-person approaches met the needs of individuals with specific accessibility challenges.

3. Lived experience and social media use age

Efforts to include lived experiences and social media in consultations were praised as positive steps towards engaging wider and more diverse audiences. Voluntary groups and the BeConnected Panel acknowledged the impact of using personal stories to foster understanding and empathy. Many groups encouraged the council to amplify this approach further to better represent diverse voices in the community.

2. Barriers and challenges to engagement

Attendees pointed to trust, accessibility and communication gaps as major barriers, with underrepresentation of key groups being a consistent challenge.

1. Trust and transparency

Participants consistently raised concerns about a lack of trust in the engagement process. Many felt that consultations risked being perceived as tokenistic without visible links between feedback and outcomes. All groups stressed the importance of demonstrating how community input shapes decision-making.

2. Accessibility barriers

Challenges related to physical, cultural, and digital accessibility were frequently mentioned. The tenant Disability Forum called for greater attention to ensuring materials and consultations are accessible to individuals with disabilities, including cognitive impairments. Key statutory organisations noted the need for culturally appropriate methods to engage minority groups more effectively.

3. Complexity and communication gaps

Overwhelming or unclear communication was identified as a significant obstacle to effective engagement. Societies and parish councils described frustration with excessive or jargon-heavy information. Students pointed out that current communications often fail to resonate with younger demographics, limiting their participation.

4. Engagement gaps

Underrepresentation of key groups was seen as a persistent issue. Voluntary organisations and the BeConnected Panel expressed concern about the limited participation of young people, digitally excluded individuals and marginalised communities. Participants warned that inaccessible or irrelevant consultation methods can lead to apathy and disengagement.

3. Suggested improvements

Overall, participants offered constructive suggestions to simplify communication, engage underrepresented groups, increase transparency and explore creative engagement methods.

1. Simplify and personalise communication

Participants called for clear, accessible and user-friendly materials. Local societies and voluntary groups suggested pre-testing materials with external stakeholders to ensure clarity and effectiveness. Personalised, targeted messaging was recommended to engage specific audiences, including younger people and minority groups.

2. Engage underrepresented groups

Targeted approaches were suggested to increase participation from underrepresented voices. Parish councils and the BeConnected Panel proposed leveraging existing networks and collaborating with trusted community groups. Tailored outreach methods were recommended for young people, culturally diverse communities and digitally excluded individuals.

3. Build transparency and accountability

Participants emphasised the need for visible follow-ups and clear communication on the impact of feedback. The tenant Disability Forum and key organisations suggested establishing measurable principles for transparency and accountability in consultations.

4. New innovative engagement methods

Creative and interactive engagement formats were proposed to make consultations more engaging and accessible. Suggestions included schools-based consultations, pulse surveys and partnerships with community influencers. Expanding to new media platforms was also recommended to connect with younger audiences and disengaged groups.

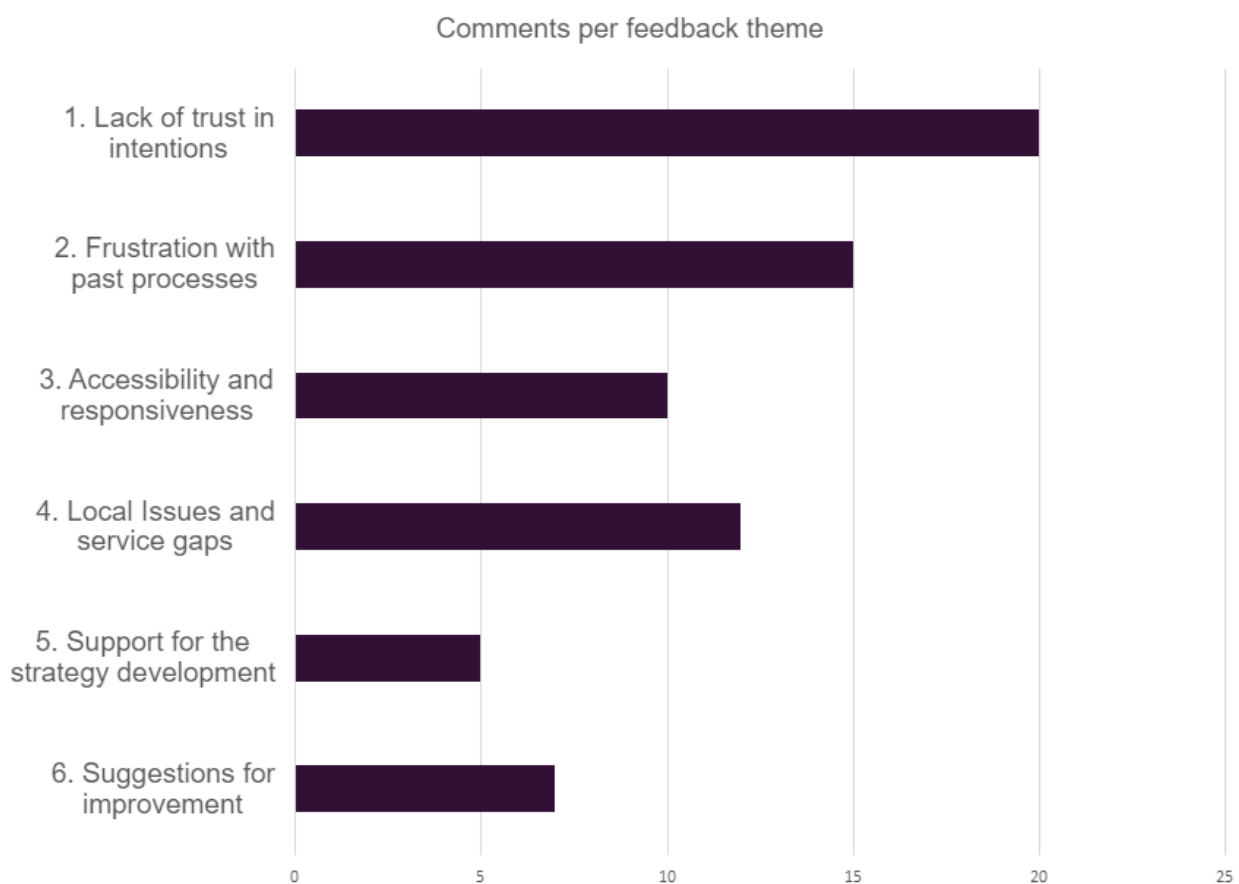
4.3. Social media feedback

Overall, commentary retrieved from Facebook and Instagram posts highlights key themes that reflect residents' concerns and suggestions for improving engagement and consultation processes.:

Comments reflected key themes around trust, accessibility and responsiveness. Common points included scepticism about the council's intentions (20 comments), frustration with past processes (15 comments) and a need for better accessibility and direct communication channels (10 comments).

Additionally, local service gaps and suggestions for improvement were highlighted, with positive support for engagement initiatives also noted (7 comments).

The below graph illustrates the frequency of comments for each of these themes.



- **Lack of trust in intentions:** 20 comments

Comments retrieved on this point were predominantly negative, reflecting scepticism about whether community input will trust reflect council decisions. Addressing this theme is key to rebuilding public trust. Transparent reporting on how feedback informs decision-making may help reduce this scepticism.

- **Frustration with past processes:** 15 comments
 These comments focused on disappointment with previous engagement efforts where feedback has been ignored or dismissed with no explanation. Acknowledging this and demonstrating responsiveness to current input could improve this perception over time.
- **Accessibility and responsiveness:** 10 comments
 Comments on this were mixed with some focusing on practical barriers to engagement, while others expressed a need for direct communication options. Expanding engagement methods beyond online surveys may enhance inclusivity and reach, particularly for those facing digital exclusion challenges.
- **Local issues and service gaps:** 12 comments
 Comments strayed away from consultation and engagement in places, with commenters emphasising specific community concerns that they felt require immediate attention. Balancing consultation efforts with tangible action on pressing concerns could demonstrate that the council is responsive to local need and priorities.
- **Support for the strategy's development:** 7 comments
 These comments were positive, showing support for engagement initiatives and a desire to improve. Although a minority, positive feedback demonstrates that there is a receptive audience for engagement. Building on this with follow-up actions, including a feedback loop, could foster wider communication involvement.
- **Suggestions for improvement:** 7 comments
 These comments were largely constructive, offering ideas to improve accessibility. These included providing more direct contact options (e.g. council phone lines) and making efforts to involve young people in decision-making to encourage a more diverse and accessible engagement process.

5. Evaluating methodology

The methodological approach for this engagement effort marked a departure from traditional strategies, with a strong focus on leveraging social media to enhance visibility, broaden participation and diversify feedback channels.

By combining a pilot pulse survey, tailored workshops and direct engagement via digital platforms, the approach sought to capture real-time, actionable feedback and address known gaps in engagement.

5.1. Strengths

Social media as a key tool

The social media campaign proved instrumental in boosting participation in the pulse survey. A paid Facebook ad and organic posts significantly expanded the survey's reach, generating 120 comments and 51 scans of the QR code.

Instagram reels, leveraging humour and informal messaging, successfully engaged younger audiences, garnering around 13,000 views. Multi-platform posts further expanded reach across diverse demographics.

Comments retrieved from posts provided valuable qualitative insights and highlighted recurring themes, such as accessibility concerns, trust issues and suggestions for improving engagement.

Pulse survey effectiveness

The pulse survey received 274 responses, offering a robust dataset for analysis. Its concise design and inclusion of qualitative response options made it accessible and engaging for participants.

Demographic insights, including postcode and age breakdowns, provided a clearer picture of participant engagement, while diversity monitoring questions not only supported inclusivity goals but also highlighted gaps, helping us identify who we might not be reaching.

Tailored workshops

Eight workshops, delivered in a hybrid format, allowed for meaningful dialogue with key groups, including parish councils, voluntary sector representatives and community panels.

Tailored discussions addressed the specific needs and priorities of different groups, enhancing the quality and depth of feedback.

Utilising multiple channels

By combining social media outreach with more traditional methods (e.g. newsletters and posters), the approach reached a broad spectrum of residents.

Community newsletters and physical posters were particularly effective in targeting specific demographics, such as younger people and those without digital access as part of a trial of targeted communications.

5.2. Challenges and limitations

Over-reliance on digital channels

While social media and digital outreach were pivotal in driving responses, feedback revealed ongoing barriers for digitally excluded groups. Some participants expressed difficulty accessing information or participating via online formats.

Limited participation from younger groups

Despite innovative efforts, such as Instagram reels, only 11.7% of survey respondents were under the age of 35, suggesting the need for further targeted engagement strategies for younger audiences.

Perceptions of engagement fatigue

Comments retrieved via social media and workshops highlighted public scepticism about whether feedback truly influences council decisions, underscoring the importance of transparency and visible action to build trust.

5.3. Lessons learned

Social media as a central engagement tool

The success of the social media push demonstrates its value as a core component of any future engagement strategies. Expanding the use of creative formats, such as reels and influencer-style content, could further enhance its reach and effectiveness.

Prioritising transparency and feedback loops

Visible follow-ups and clear explanations of how feedback informs decisions are critical to addressing trust issues raised in feedback. Establishing clear reporting mechanisms could strengthen future engagement efforts.

Reaching underrepresented groups

Despite the broad reach achieved, further work is needed to engage younger people, digitally excluded groups and marginalised communities. Partnerships with schools, youth organisations and community leaders could be explored to close these gaps.

Striking a balance (digital vs traditional methods)

While digital strategies were highly effective, a hybrid approach remains essential to ensure inclusivity. Exploring new methods to complement digital outreach, such as in-person events or partnerships with local organisations, could help bridge the accessibility gap.

Overall, the emphasis on social media as a central engagement tool was a defining feature of this methodological approach, driving both survey responses and meaningful dialogue with the community

While challenges around trust, accessibility and demographic representation persist, the lessons from this evaluation provide a solid foundation for refining future strategies. By building on the successes of the social media push and addressing identified gaps, the council can continue to foster more inclusive, transparent and impactful engagement processes.

6. Conclusions

The findings from this early engagement process, spanning the pulse survey, workshops, and social media feedback, offer valuable insights to shape a robust and inclusive draft Consultation and Engagement Strategy.

The methodology, which combined digital innovation with traditional outreach, successfully broadened the council's reach and provided a nuanced understanding of community perspectives.

Social media proved to be a cornerstone of success in the pilot pulse survey, driving both participation and real-time feedback.

However, the workshops demonstrated the value of in-person engagement both for reaching those excluded from digital platforms and for obtaining high quality qualitative feedback from stakeholders. To meet Objective 1, the focus should be on a hybrid engagement model that maximises digital tools while maintaining accessible, face-to-face opportunities.

Despite strong participation overall, gaps remain in engaging underrepresented groups, particularly younger people, those facing digital exclusion and marginalised communities. This aligns directly with Objective 2. Leveraging partnerships with community organisations, expanding offline engagement opportunities and adopting culturally tailored approaches are essential to ensure all voices are included.

Barriers such as complex language, information overload and limited accessibility were highlighted throughout the feedback. Aligning with Objective 3, staff training and the development of user-friendly communication materials will be critical to ensuring engagement is inclusive.

A lack of trust in the engagement process was a recurring concern, with participants questioning whether their input meaningfully informs decisions. This underscores the importance of Objective 4: ensuring transparent reporting and clear evidence of how feedback is used to shape council actions. Implementing visible follow-up mechanisms and providing regular updates to residents will be pivotal in addressing this.

Others expressed a desire for more frequent and meaningful opportunities to engage. This reinforces the need to deliver on Objective 5 by establishing regular feedback mechanisms such as short-form surveys, open forums and dynamic consultation formats to better understand evolving community priorities.

Ultimately, the findings reinforce the necessity of a strategy grounded in transparency, inclusion and collaboration. By embedding these principles into its engagement practices,

the council can not only strengthen its relationships with the community but also ensure that its policies, plans, and decisions reflect the diverse voices it serves. This is an opportunity to deliver engagement activities that are proactive, equitable and impactful.

By addressing the identified challenges and building on the successes of this early engagement process, the council can lay the foundation for a strategy that empowers its residents to actively shape the future of their communities.