

Item: 9

Policy and Resources Committee: 19 June 2018.

Orkney Public Consultation Group.

Report by Executive Director of Corporate Services.

1. Purpose of Report

To review progress made during the one-year pilot of the Orkney Public Consultation Group, Orkney Opinions, note the findings of surveys and consider the future of the group.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is invited to note:

2.1.

That, in October 2016, the Council agreed to pilot an Orkney Public Consultation Group, for an initial period of one year, following which the pilot should be evaluated.

2.2.

That the Orkney Public Consultation Group, named Orkney Opinions, is available to all Council services to help inform their service developments.

2.3.

That the pilot year ran from March 2017 to March 2018, a total of 151 members were recruited to join the group and three surveys have taken place, with the survey findings noted in Appendices 2 to 4 to this report.

2.4.

That senior officers and managers have been consulted as to the utility of Orkney Opinions and wish the pilot to be continued, subject to the continued availability of staff resources.

It is recommended:

2.5.

That Orkney Opinions be continued for a further year, to 31 March 2019, following which the Executive Director of Corporate Services should submit a further report, to the Policy and Resources Committee.

3. Introduction

3.1.

At its meeting held on 27 September 2016, the Policy and Resources Committee noted:

3.1.1.

The extent of Council activity in community consultation and engagement, as detailed in Annex A to the report by the Executive Director of Corporate Services.

3.1.2.

External policy drivers for development of best practice in consultation and engagement, as detailed in section 4.4 of the report by the Executive Director of Corporate Services.

3.1.3.

The findings of the Change Programme with regard to the benefits which establishment of a public consultation group could bring to the Council, as detailed in section 4.6 of the report by the Executive Director of Corporate Services.

3.1.4.

Best practice guidance in respect of establishing a public consultation group, as detailed in section 5 of the report by the Executive Director of Corporate Services.

3.1.5.

The opportunity to gain synergy and save resources by the deployment of more Council-wide resources for consultation and engagement, to prevent duplication between services.

3.2.

The Committee recommended:

3.2.1.

That an Orkney Public Consultation Group be piloted, for an initial period of one year, as a Council resource for consultation and engagement.

3.2.2.

That the Executive Director of Corporate Services should undertake an evaluation of the pilot, referred to at paragraph 3.2.1 above, and thereafter submit a report, to the next available meeting of the Committee, on the outcome of the evaluation and the potential establishment of an Orkney Public Consultation Group on a more permanent basis, if appropriate.

4. Methodology

4.1.

Following endorsement of the pilot year by the Council, work began on a Project Initiation Document that was approved by the Senior Management Team on 17 January 2017.

4.2.

In the first instance it was agreed that prospective participants for Orkney Opinions would be recruited through sampling of the electoral roll. Written invitations were issued to every 20th name on the open register, a total of 548. Invitees were asked to complete a membership form providing basic demographic data. This exercise was carried out in March 2017 with 87 positive responses received.

4.3.

The Project Initiation Document had originally contained a stated expectation that membership would be around 200 so a second sampling of the electoral roll took place in May and June 2017 with another 196 invitations issued, bringing the membership up to 119. Demographic analysis showed the membership to be well balanced in most regards but under-represented in the younger age groups. Some of the smaller isles were not represented due to the random nature of the sampling method.

4.4.

Two targeted mailshots were conducted in August and September 2017 to improve the representation of hard-to-reach groups. One was sent to residents in the non-linked isles and the other one to students of Orkney College (with the permission of the Principal). Together these raised the membership of Orkney Opinions to 151. A demographic breakdown of the membership is attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

4.5.

Members of Orkney Opinions were offered a choice between receiving their surveys by email and responding online or receiving them by post in hard copy and posting them back in a reply-paid envelope. The opportunity to switch to online return was offered each time a survey was issued. By 1 April 2018, 47% of Orkney Opinions members had opted to receive their surveys by email.

4.6.

The content of the surveys was steered by the Consultation and Engagement Officers' Group, and members of this group contributed some of the survey questions.

5. Survey findings

5.1.

In June 2017, the first survey was issued to the initial 119 members of Orkney Opinions, asking about their use of the Council's website and how they would like to see it improved. 68 responses were received, representing a 57% return rate. This was comparable to return rates typically found in other local authorities (Moray 52%, Aberdeen 63%, East Renfrewshire 60%, Clackmannanshire 63%). The results of each survey were compiled into two reports, a detailed report for internal use and a summary report for external use, including feedback to members of Orkney Opinions. The summary report is attached as Appendix 2 to this report.

5.2.

In October 2017 the second survey was issued to the 151 members of Orkney Opinions, asking questions about Orkney Health and Care, development in the countryside, and issues relating to Our Islands, Our Future. 56 responses were received, representing a lower return rate of 37.1%. The summary results of the second survey are attached as Appendix 3 to this report.

5.3.

The third and final survey of the pilot year was issued in February 2018 to 150 members (one having left the group), asking questions on active travel, Orkney's countryside and the Council's equality outcomes. 77 replies were received, representing an improved return rate on the second survey of 51.3%. The summary results of the third survey are attached as Appendix 4 to this report.

5.4.

Highlight reports on progress were made to the Consultation and Engagement Officers' Group meetings in March, May and September 2017, and January 2018. The full results of all three surveys were circulated to the Senior Management Team for their information.

5.5.

Summarised versions of the survey results were fed back to the members of Orkney Opinions.

6. Conclusions

6.1.

The main challenge of the pilot was the generation of sufficient material from across a wide enough range of Council services to populate the surveys and ensure that the questions elicited enough interest from the Orkney Opinions members to incentivise them to take the time to respond.

6.2.

Officers from the various services who prepared and put forward questions were asked for informal feedback on the data they received from the Orkney Opinions members and were wholly in favour of the group. It was stated that they found the demographics of the group useful, that engagement was high, and officers felt that the Council was able to reach a wider group of people through Orkney Opinions than would usually respond to consultations advertised in the public domain, or who turn up to open meetings.

6.3.

Following consideration by the Senior Management Team at their meeting of 15 May 2018, senior managers were consulted regarding the potential extension of the pilot. All responses received to date were positive, and managers are planning to use the group during 2018 to 2019, subject to resourcing being available for its continuation.

6.4.

The costs of operating Orkney Opinions have to date been absorbed by Corporate Services. Virement of funds was achieved internally within the Directorate to enable the Administrative Support Manager to contribute to this project. It is anticipated that this arrangement is likely to be able to continue until the end of the current financial year.

6.5.

Extending the pilot for a further year would be advantageous in enabling the Consultation and Engagement Officers' Group to consolidate the work done in establishing the group and to establish the ongoing level of demand from Council services in steady state. In addition, officers could usefully assess the quality of survey responses, and their value to managers in decision-making. However, further continuation beyond March 2019 would not be feasible unless the budget for supporting this group were to be prioritised.

7. Links to Council Plan

The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the Council Plan strategic priorities of Connected Communities, Caring Communities, Thriving Communities, Enterprising Communities and Quality of Life.

8. Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan

The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the Local Outcomes Improvement Plan priorities of Strong Communities, Living Well, and A Vibrant Economy.

9. Financial Implications

9.1.

Funding for Orkney Opinions has to date been achieved through the reassignment of existing resources within Corporate Services, and this option is available for the financial year 2018 to 2019.

9.2.

Should the Council wish to extend Orkney Opinions beyond the end of March 2019, a more sustainable budgeting proposal will be submitted to Policy and Resources Committee for consideration.

10. Legal Aspects

There are no significant legal implications arising from the recommendations contained in this report.

11. Contact Officers

Gillian Morrison, Executive Director of Corporate Services, extension 2103, Email gillian.morrison@orkney.gov.uk.

Anna Whelan, Strategy Manager, extension 2160, Email anna.whelan@orkney.gov.uk.

12. Appendices

Appendix 1: Orkney Opinions Demographic Data.

Appendix 2: Orkney Opinions Survey 1 summary results.

Appendix 3: Orkney Opinions Survey 2 summary results.

Appendix 4: Orkney Opinions Survey 3 summary results.