

Public Engagement

At the City of St. John's



An evaluation

ST. JOHN'S

Prepared by the Division of Organizational
Performance & Strategy

Department of Finance & Administration

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Contents

What is public engagement?	2
Our commitment to public engagement	2
Our engagement activities.....	2
Evaluating our engagement	3
The evaluation process.....	3
Who we heard from.....	5
What we learned	6
About the engagement process overall.....	6
About what happens before, during and after engagement.....	6
About how we are meeting the goals of the engage policy	11
About how the principles of the engage policy are being applied	13
About the effectiveness of engagedjohns.ca as an engagement tool.....	15
Conclusions and Recommendations	18
APPENDIX A	22

What is public engagement?

Public engagement is a process that brings people together to address issues of common importance, and to solve shared problems. Cities and other public organizations have increasingly been incorporating public engagement into their way of doing business. Public engagement allows cities to work more collaboratively with their residents and establish processes for public input that help to inform the decision-making process. Research indicates that cities with effective public engagement processes develop plans, strategies, programs and policies to better meet the needs of their residents and key stakeholders. In turn, this results in increased citizen satisfaction.

Our commitment to public engagement

The City of St. John's recognizes that engagement between the City and its citizens is an essential component of an effective government. Three years ago, we set out to more firmly entrench public engagement into the organization and the way we do business.

In April 2014, the City established the Engage! St. John's Task Force bringing together 25 organizational and citizen-at-large representatives to help shape the City's policy direction for public engagement. The Task Force delivered its final report and recommendations in October of that year and the City adopted its public engagement policy and framework shortly thereafter.

We apply the engage policy to all activities and opportunities where information is shared and/or input is sought, including mandated and legislative processes. Our commitment to creating a culture of public engagement is also incorporated into the City's corporate strategic plan.

The Division of Organizational Performance and Strategy (Department of Finance and Administration) is responsible for the development and maintenance of the City's engagement framework including building capacity internally and externally and developing tools and supports for processes.

Our engagement activities

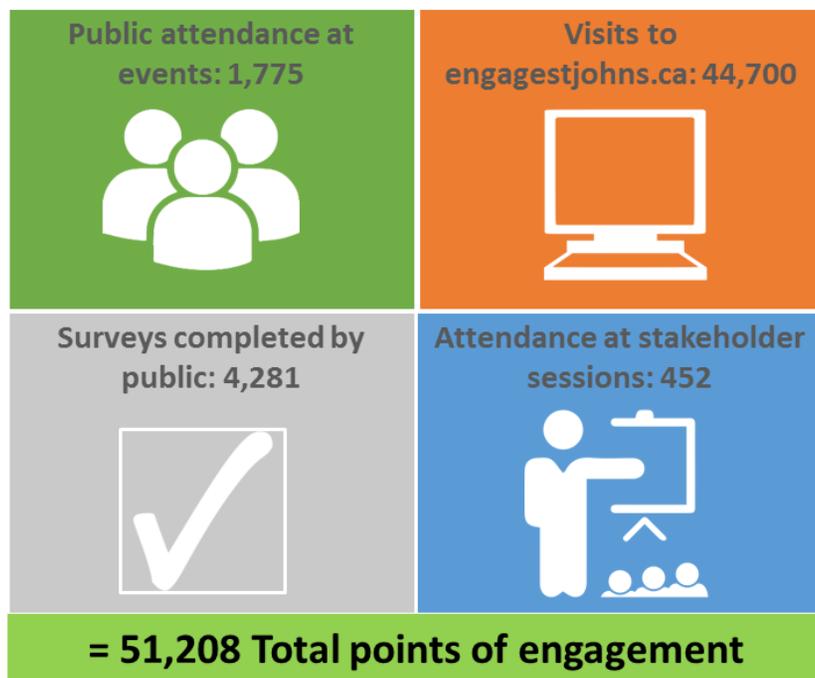
Since the launch of the engagement policy, 27 projects have had public engagement plans including: programming at the Paul Reynold's Community Centre, the revitalization of Victoria Park, the budget, the development of Kenmount Terrace Community Park, and Automated Garbage, to name a few (see appendix A for a complete list). An online engagement platform (engagestjohns.ca) was launched in May 2015 and now has more than 1,100 registered users.

From June 2014 to October 2017, the City's engagement program generated 51,208 total points of engagement (see infographic on page 3).

Building internal capacity for engagement

The City has also worked to build internal capacity for engagement across the organization, offering multiple training sessions in various aspects of engagement including Engagement 101 introductory training, five-day International Association for

Public Participation (IAP2) training focused on planning and tools and techniques for public participation, IAP2 Decision Makers session for Council and executive staff, and training on how to use the engagestjohns.ca platform.



Evaluating our engagement

Three years in to the adoption of the engagement policy it is important that we evaluate our public engagement framework and practices to identify opportunities, gaps, and challenges and to ascertain how they can be addressed.

The objectives of the evaluation are to:

1. Determine the extent to which the engagement activities and initiatives undertaken by the City since the adoption of the Engage! Policy are meeting the goals and principles of the policy;
2. Assess the effectiveness of the online Engage! St. John's platform (engagestjohns.ca) as an engagement tool;
3. Ascertain the effectiveness and make recommendations for improvements/enhancements to the City's engagement framework, tools and activities.

The evaluation process

The flowchart on the following page identifies the steps taken, the information sources used, and the techniques and tools utilized to complete the engagement evaluation. The evaluation process was approved by Council and the evaluation was completed by staff in the Organizational Performance & Strategy division.

It is important to note that the evaluation does not include analysis of the City's website or social media channels, nor does it include a detailed assessment of City Advisory Committees as these committees were reviewed separately and reconfigured in 2016 (relevant items from that review were, however, incorporated in the evaluation).

STEP 1: Develop a work plan

Jurisdictional scan of engagement evaluations	Develop work plan, define staff roles, identify tools and methods of data collection	Present work plan to Council for approval
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STEP 2: Identify the issues and opportunities (data gathering)

Facilitated discussion with City staff who lead engagement projects	User analytics from engagement website engagestjohns.ca	Feedback forms from various engagement events and staff training sessions	Online surveys (Public and Council)	Information from 2016 review of Advisory Committees	Meeting with City's Marketing and Communications team	Peer review of engagestjohns.ca to collect feedback on how site is being used to engage citizens
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STEP 3: Analysis and recommendations

Analysis of all data and information to identify actions and recommendations based on findings and feedback	Development of final report and ' <i>what we heard</i> ' document	Release of ' <i>what we heard</i> ' document to public	Presentation of final report to Council for approval	Release of final report to public
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Who we heard from

To ensure the engagement evaluation process was robust, we gathered the perspectives of the following:

1. **Citizens** – Citizens are stakeholders in all of the City’s engagement activities. As part of the evaluation, we reached out to citizens via an online survey to seek feedback on our engagement practices and activities and to gather opinions on how the City could enhance its public engagement.

Six hundred and forty-one individuals responded to the survey between July 13 and September 10, 2017. This included individuals who had participated in engagement activities as well as those who had not previously participated (64 percent and 36 percent respectively). Survey participants were fairly evenly distributed across the City’s five wards and three percent of respondents resided outside the City of St. John’s. Two percent of respondents were members of the Engage Task Force – citizens who helped the City craft its engagement policy and framework, and eight percent of respondents were current or past members of a City Advisory Committee. Forty percent of respondents were between the ages of 25-44, 42 percent were aged 45-64, and only 2 percent were aged 19-24. Fifty-eight percent of respondents had completed a college or university diploma or degree.

2. **Staff** – City staff are on the frontline of engagement. They implement the City’s engagement policy and framework

for a wide variety of projects. We hosted a facilitated discussion with ten staff from across the organization who have led projects with an engagement component. The discussion helped us identify challenges and opportunities and determine how we can enhance internal capacity and support engagement across the organization. A meeting was also held with the City’s Marketing and Communications team to discuss the relationship between communications and engagement and plans for implementing a communications strategy. Staff that act as site administrators for the engagestjohns.ca site were also consulted on the effectiveness of the platform.

3. **Council** – Council interacts with citizens on a daily basis. They are the face of public engagement, and are often in attendance at the City’s public engagement events. In addition, they are the City’s ultimate decision makers, determining when public engagement is required, at what level, and using the results of public engagement to help inform the decisions they make on behalf of citizens. We surveyed Council to better understand their perspectives on public engagement, and to identify what is working well and what could be improved. Five members of Council responded to the survey in June of 2017.
4. **Engagement HQ** – Engagement HQ is the company that provides the City with its online engagement platform

engagestjohns.ca. We asked them to review our site, assess how effectively we are using it, and make suggestions for improvements.

What we learned

The information collected from our surveys, meetings, and other research has enabled us to learn more about the engagement process overall and what happens before, during, and after engagement. We've also learned about how we're meeting the goals and principles of the engagement policy and how effective our online platform, engagestjohns.ca, is as an engagement tool.

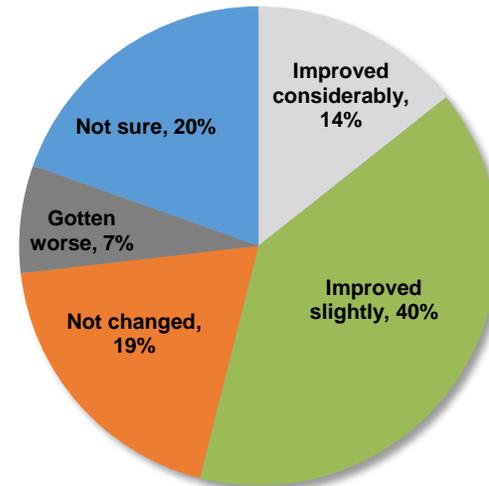
About the engagement process overall

Public engagement is important to, and valued by, citizens, staff, and Council. When asked in our online survey how important it was that the City provide opportunities for public input and engagement, citizens overwhelmingly indicated that engagement was very important. Similarly, staff and Council see engagement as a valuable tool to aid in the City's decision-making process.

About what happens before, during and after engagement

Engagement activities generally have three distinct stages during which various tasks are undertaken and activities take place. The following sections provide the feedback we received from the public (via online survey), staff, and Council regarding each of these stages.

Since 2014 has the City's engagement efforts...
Survey results (n=634)



Note: of the 20 percent who were "not sure" if the City's engagement efforts had improved since 2014, 59 percent had not participated in City engagement activities during that time.

Before Engagement

In the period before an engagement activity or event takes place, City staff are developing a plan to guide the engagement process asking questions such as: What are the goals of the engagement? What decisions are being informed? Who is being engaged? How are they being engaged? During this period, communications and advertising for the engagement process also occurs. Here's what we learned about the period before engagement:

Planning

- Staff indicated that engagement is most effective when it is considered early in the planning stages for a project. At times, however, project timelines are compressed and having sufficient time for planning engagement can be a challenge.
- In developing an engagement plan, clarity regarding decision points is essential (i.e. are there decisions to be made during the project and what are they?). If decision points exist, an engagement plan can be built to help inform them. If no decision points exist then the goal is to inform citizens rather than consult and a communications plan, rather than an engagement plan, is required. This distinction is not always clear to staff and they require varying levels of guidance on this issue. There is also confusion regarding which internal team – communications or engagement - should be contacted for support with the planning process.
- Engagement planning should always include identification of goals and objectives, which guide the engagement process and aid in post-engagement evaluation.

Tools, resources and training

- Staff indicated the need for a clear flow chart on the engagement process/framework that could serve as a step-by-step guide and aid in planning. The current staff toolkit may need to be enhanced.
- Staff indicated that having a central resource (division of Organizational Performance & Strategy) is instrumental in helping with the development and implementation of engagement plans.

- Identifying appropriate stakeholders can sometimes be a challenge for staff who are leading engagement activities. Contacting the people that are impacted by a project is critical but can be difficult as there is no central source of contact information.
- Many staff have been trained in Public Engagement 101 and this training was well-received by participants. Some staff suggested that additional follow-up training would be beneficial and could help with some of the uncertainties staff are experiencing.

Communications and promotion

- To participate in City engagement activities, citizens need to be aware of the opportunities. Of those citizens surveyed, who had participated in engagement activities, 61 percent felt that ways to get involved were well communicated and promoted, and 70 percent indicated that they received sufficient notice about the opportunity to participate.
- For those who have not provided input to the City over the past three years (36 percent of survey respondents), 54 percent indicated the number one reason was their lack of awareness of the opportunities. When we asked about barriers to participation, lack of awareness was mentioned by all who had not participated.
- The City's Marketing and Communications team indicated that a communications plan was developed for the City's public engagement program in 2014 when the policy and framework were approved and while some elements have been implemented, there is a need to revisit and refresh the

plan. This would aid in creating greater public awareness of the City’s engagement activities and tools.

- According to the online survey, the most effective ways for the City to let citizens know about upcoming engagement events or activities are: 1) E-update subscription-based email service; 2) Social media (Twitter, Facebook etc.); 3) Flyer or postcard in my mailbox.

Encouraging participation

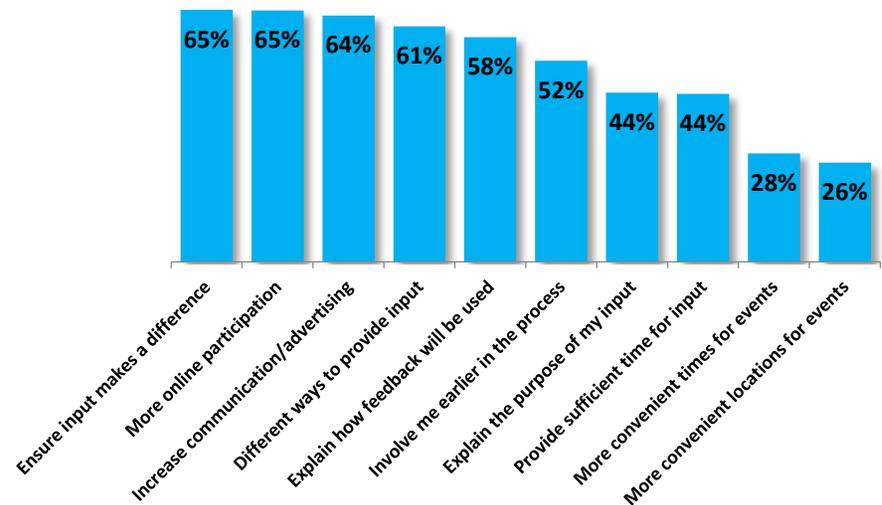
- Fifty-two percent of respondents to the public survey indicated that involving them earlier in the engagement process would encourage them to participate.
- When asked how they would most like to be involved and provide input to inform City programs, services and decision making, 89 percent of survey respondents chose online. *Online was the top choice regardless of age, ward or previous experience in participating.* At the same time, however, staff suggested that the tools used for engagement must fit the audience. Many seniors, for example, may not be online. Convenience is important as well – times and locations of engagement activities impact participation. More convenient times and locations would encourage slightly more than a quarter of survey respondents to provide input to the City. Wheelchair accessibility, the availability of childcare, and parking also impacts citizen participation.
- The top three ways to encourage citizens to participate in engagement activities, according to the online survey, were: ensure my input actually makes a difference; offer more opportunities for online participation; and increase

communication/advertising about opportunities to get involved.

- Staff suggested that there is an opportunity to engage City Advisory Committees more frequently.

What would most encourage citizens to provide input to inform City programs, services and decision making

Survey results (n=536)
Note: question allowed multiple responses



During Engagement

During an engagement activity information is being provided, and input is being solicited and received, often through a combination of online and in-person activities. A variety of

engagement tools are being implemented (e.g. surveys, forums, polls). Promotion of the engagement activity is continuing, reminders are being sent. Staff are actively involved by organizing, attending and monitoring engagement activities. Members of Council are also often participating. Here's what we learned about the period during engagement:

Participation

- Sixty-four percent of respondents to the online citizen survey have shared input with the City in the past three years by participating in a public engagement activity or event. Sixty-eight percent of those participants believe that as a result of participating, they have more information about what's happening in the City.
- Feedback forms from City engagement events, though few, indicate that citizens participate when a topic is of interest to them and/or has the potential to directly impact them. When asked why they did not participate in an engagement activity offered by the City in the past three years (36 percent did not), almost 20 percent of those respondents indicated the opportunity offered did not meet their needs or was not of interest.
- There is a feeling amongst Council members surveyed that more Council participation at in-person engagement events would be beneficial.

Participant experiences

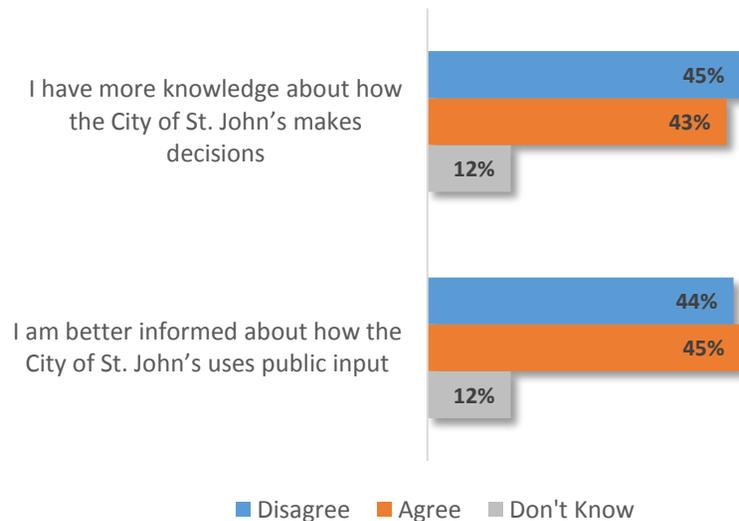
- When citizens responding to the online survey were asked about their experience participating in a City engagement activity, results were generally positive. Three quarters

indicated that the purpose of gathering the input was clear, and the scope of the overall project was clear. Sixty-four percent agreed that events were held at convenient locations. Slightly fewer (57 percent), agreed that events were held at convenient times. Several respondents indicated that working full-time made it difficult for them to attend events during regular working hours.

- Almost 70 percent of survey respondents that had participated in a City engagement activity, indicated that they were satisfied overall. Feedback forms completed by participants after events also indicate that the engagement activity met their expectations.
- Three quarters of survey respondents indicated that information on the topic was available prior to or during the event they had attended and that the information provided had allowed them to participate in an informed manner.
- When asked if they were better informed about how the City of St. John's uses public input as a result of attending an engagement activity/event, 45 percent of those who participated indicated they were, 44 percent indicated they were not, and 12 percent didn't know.
- When asked if after attending an engagement activity or event they had more knowledge about how the City of St. John's makes decisions, 43 percent of respondents who had participated indicated they did and 45 percent indicated they did not.

Opinions of participants in City engagement activities

Survey results (n=350)



Process

- During in-person engagement events, attendees are encouraged to sign in at the beginning of the event and to complete an evaluation form at the end. Staff have suggested that both of these processes need streamlining or perhaps a new approach as current methods have resulted in incomplete data. Incomplete data makes evaluating and reporting on engagement difficult.
- Staff indicated that engagement must include clear information regarding what decisions can and cannot be

influenced and outline the purpose of the engagement. The results of the online survey indicate that citizens want to know how their feedback will be used (58 percent of survey respondents) and what the purpose of their input is (44 percent of survey respondents).

After Engagement

After an engagement activity is completed staff are organizing, analyzing, distributing, and presenting the information collected. 'What we heard' documents are being developed and distributed back to participants. Reports and recommendations are being formulated. Council is provided with the results of the engagement. Decisions are made. Here's what we learned about the period after engagement:

Follow-up (closing the loop)

- Staff indicated that timely follow-up after engagement is critical. Updates are important to let citizens know about progress and outcomes. Survey results indicate, however, that this follow-up may not always be reaching participants. Forty-four percent of survey respondents that had participated in an engagement activity indicated that after the engagement, information was not provided on what was heard through the engagement process (e.g. they were not aware that a 'what we heard' document was produced). Fifty-four percent indicated that once the City's decision was made, they did not receive information about the decision. Fifty percent indicated that information was not provided about what the City's next steps would be. The

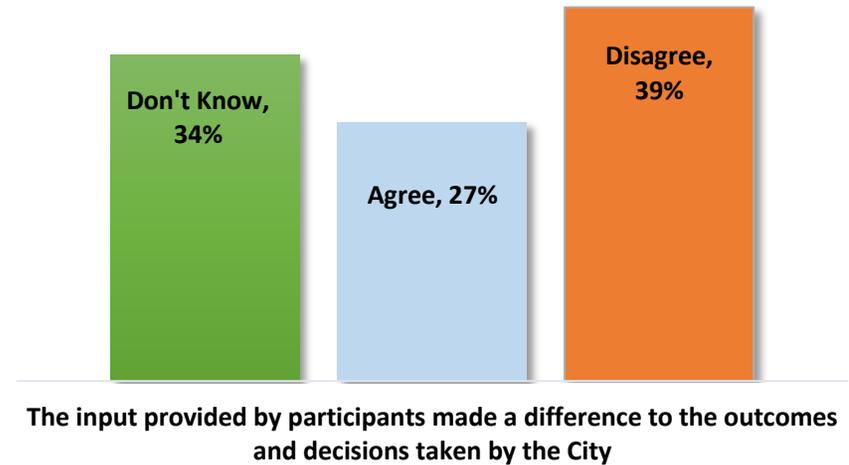
communications plan discussed with the City's Marketing and Communications team could aid in this regard.

- Inconsistent data collection at in-person engagement events (sign-in sheets and evaluation forms) creates a challenge for staff when reporting on, and evaluating the success of, engagement activities. Incomplete or illegible sign-in sheets make direct follow-up with participants difficult.
- There was a suggestion that a summary report be produced to outline all the engagement activities the City has undertaken since the launch of the engage policy and framework.

Engagement and decision making

- Council members surveyed indicated that public engagement is valuable to decision making and is considered in concert with other information.
- Ensuring citizen input actually makes a difference was cited by 65 percent of survey respondents as a way to encourage them to provide input to the City.
- Councillors surveyed agreed that results of public engagement are readily available to Council to aid in its decision making and that the information collected through public engagement is the right type of information. They indicated that 'a *what we heard*' document was an effective way to provide them with the results of public engagement. They also suggested that results could be presented to the relevant City committees.

**Opinions of participants in City engagement activities
Survey results (n=350)**



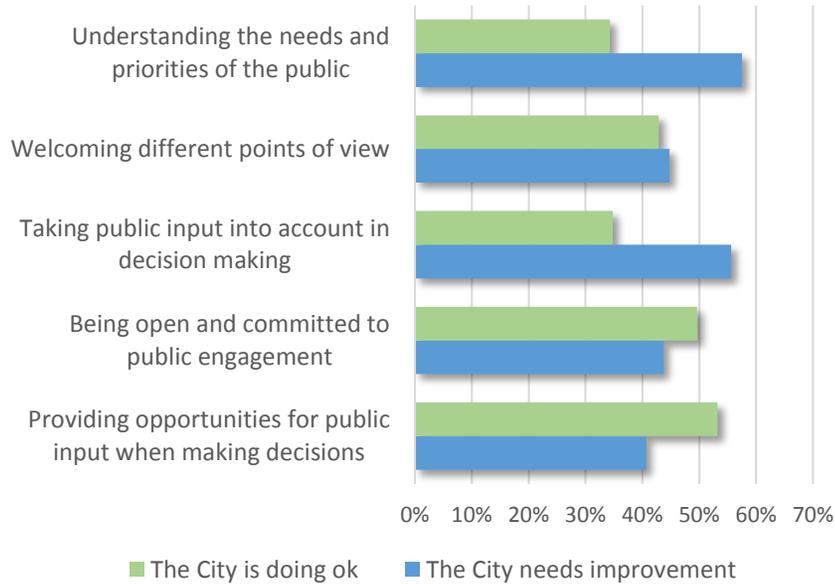
About how we are meeting the goals of the engage policy

The Engage policy adopted by the City in 2014 outlines six goals. As part of the evaluation, we looked at how the City's engagement activities over the past three years have met those goals. The table on the following page presents the results.

Goals of our public engagement policy	What we heard about how we are meeting these goals
IMPROVE and inform decision making and programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillors surveyed indicated that public engagement helps to inform their decision making and suggested that it is important for Council to understand how engagement fits into the decision making process. • Staff indicated that engagement activities have helped inform decisions on some of the projects they have led. However, they also suggested that there are inconsistencies in how the information collected from engagement is used across the organization in decision making. • When we asked citizens how well the City does at taking public input into account in decision making, 56 percent of survey respondents indicated that the City needed improvement in that area. • When asked if the input provided by participants made a difference to the outcomes and decisions taken by the City, 39 percent of survey respondents who had participated in a City engagement activity said no, and 34 percent didn't know.
CREATE space for everyone to feel involved and listened to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seventy-eight percent of survey respondents that had participated in a City engagement activity or event, indicated that it was easy to participate. Seventy-nine percent indicated that views could be expressed freely. • Staff and Council members surveyed expressed concerns that while participation in City engagement activities was increasing, there might be a portion of the population that was not being reached (e.g. low income, new Canadians, seniors). • Reviews of previous engagement projects indicates that the 18-35 year old demographic is not actively participating in City engagement activities.
SHARE information effectively and welcome different points of view	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When asked how well the City did with welcoming different points of view, 45 percent of citizens responding to the survey indicated that the City needed improvement in that area, 43 percent indicated the City did ok or well. • Seventy-four percent of survey respondents that had participated in a City engagement activity or event, indicated that the information provided allowed them to participate in an informed manner.
GENERATE new ideas and solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff indicated that new information has been brought to light on several projects through the engagement process.
BUILD trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When asked if public engagement helps build trust between the City and the public it serves, 77 percent of survey respondents who had participated in a public engagement activity said yes. The reverse of this statement is, of course, also true – lack of public engagement, or ineffective public engagement, can erode trust. • Staff indicated that trust can be built if the goals of the engagement are communicated clearly – what the engagement will actually influence and what it will not influence needs to be addressed at the beginning of the engagement process and reinforced throughout. • Councillors surveyed indicated that public engagement does build trust with citizens and is important to creating transparency in decision making.
UNDERSTAND the needs and priorities of the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When asked how well the City understands the needs and priorities of the public, 58 percent of survey respondents indicated the City needed improvement in that area, 35 percent indicated the City did ok or well.

Opinions of survey respondents

(n=637)



About how the principles of the engage policy are being applied

The City’s Engage policy recognizes that there are four key principles required to ensure successful public engagement: commitment, accountability, clear and timely communication, and inclusiveness. These principles are based on the core values set out by the International Association for Public Participation. As part of the evaluation process, we wanted to determine if these principles were applied when the City undertook engagement projects. The table on the following page outlines results.



1 WORKSHOP KENMOUNT TERRACE COMMUNITY PARK CONSULTATION



2 CENTURY PARK OPEN HOUSE

Principle	What it means	What we heard about how the principles are being applied
Commitment	To developing a culture of engagement and providing the appropriate resources to carry out effective engagement work. City projects and plans will incorporate appropriate engagement strategies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When asked how well the City did at being open and committed to public engagement, 50 percent of survey respondents indicated the City did well or ok in this area. Forty-four percent indicated the City needed improvement in this area. • Staff and Council members surveyed indicated that public engagement is important to the City and they share a commitment to it. • When asked how well the City was adhering to the principle of commitment, Council members surveyed indicated moderately or very well. They also suggested additional engagement resources would be beneficial. • While internal capacity for public engagement has been built, staff believe additional training and enhanced tools would enable more effective engagement.
Accountability	Engagement is built into the City's plans and strategies with the Mayor, Councillors and City Manager ultimately accountable for the development, implementation and evaluation of the engagement framework.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While many City projects and plans incorporate engagement, engagement is most effective when it is considered early in the project planning process. • Councillors surveyed suggested that more Council participation in engagement events would be beneficial. • When asked how well the City was adhering to the principle of accountability, Councillors surveyed indicated moderately or very well. They also suggested that it would be beneficial to be reminded of the engagement framework on a regular basis to aid in their understanding of how it fits into the decision making process. • Councillors surveyed indicated that their role in engagement is to promote engagement opportunities to residents, to attend events, listen to input, and to use the information gathered in decision making.
Clear and timely information	Communication between stakeholders and the City must be accessible, timely, complete, accurate, free of jargon and make clear how stakeholders are being engaged and how the input will be used.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seventy-nine percent of survey respondents that had participated in a City engagement event indicated that information was provided in an appropriate format. Seventy-eight percent indicated the information was clear and easy to understand. • Forty-nine percent of survey respondents that had participated in a City engagement event indicated that it was not clear how the information collected would be used by the City. • Staff indicated that it was important that the City clearly communicate how public engagement factors in the overall decision making process.
Inclusiveness	Employ a variety of methods and tools to connect with those who will be directly and indirectly impacted thereby eliminating barriers to participation wherever possible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sixty-two percent of survey respondents that had participated in a City engagement event indicated a variety of options were available to provide input. • The online engagement platform, engagestjohns.ca, enables the City to reach a broader audience, however, it is important to note that not all stakeholders are online. • Of the 27 engagement projects undertaken by the City since 2014, the vast majority utilized a variety of online and in-person engagement methods. • Staff indicated that identifying stakeholders and reaching the people most impacted by a project is sometimes a challenge. • Staff and Councillors surveyed expressed concern that City engagement might not be reaching some segments of the population (e.g. seniors, new Canadians). Also, youth engagement (18-35 years) is challenging. • Staff suggested engagement tools must fit the audience. • When asked why they hadn't participated in a City engagement activity in the past three years, 54 percent of respondents who had not participated indicated they were not aware of the opportunities. • Barriers to participation also include the time and location of events, especially for citizens who are working.

About the effectiveness of engagestjohns.ca as an engagement tool

The City's online engagement platform, engagestjohns.ca, was launched in May 2015 as a means of reaching a broader audience and increasing opportunities to engage. Since that time, the site has been used in dozens of projects and has become a significant part of the City's engagement toolkit. The site is currently hosted on the Engagement HQ platform.

We know from our online survey that providing public input online is a preferred method of engagement. Eighty-nine percent of all survey respondents indicated that they would most like to provide input to the City online. Sixty-two percent indicated more online engagement would encourage them to participate. These results clearly indicate that an online engagement tool is a necessity for the City of St. John's.

As part of our evaluation, we reviewed available analytics from the engagestjohns.ca platform and gathered feedback on how effective the platform is as an engagement tool for the public as well as for Council and staff (both staff that lead engagement projects and staff that act as site administrators). We also asked our current service provider, Engagement HQ, to review our site and provide comments on how effectively we are using it and its various tools to engage the public.

[Engagestjohns.ca analytics](#)

Usage data (analytics) collected from engagestjohns.ca was reviewed as part of the evaluation process. Analytics includes such data as the number of registered users, visits, file

downloads, and sources of traffic. It is important to note that analytics include usage generated by City Advisory Committees and other non-public groups that use the platform as a tool for sharing information, though these would be a small portion of overall visits.

Engagestjohns.ca has approximately 1,100 registered users (to September 2017) and has recorded over 44,000 visits and more than 5,700 file downloads since June 2015. The site has also logged 2,800 photo views and 300 video views.

The majority of engagestjohns.ca users come to the site directly, that is they type the name of the site into a browser. Some users are referred to engagestjohns.ca from another website (by clicking a link). The top referring websites, in order, are: vocm.com, stjohns.ca (City website), cbc.ca, telegram.com, and curbitstjohns.ca (City waste and recycling site). Google is by far the top referring search engine. The top referring social media site is Facebook, followed by Twitter.

Engagement HQ analytics classifies site visitors in one of three categories:

- Aware – people who have visited at least one page.
- Informed – people who have taken some action to learn more about a project. For example, by clicking on a link, visiting a second page, or downloading a document.
- Engaged - people who have actively contributed to a project. For example, by taking a quick poll or survey, asking a question, or commenting in a forum.

Approximately 80 percent of engagestjohns.ca users fall into the Aware category, 16 percent are Informed users, and 5 percent are Engaged. Increasing the number of engaged users is important to building an effective engagement program.

Public perspective on engagestjohns.ca

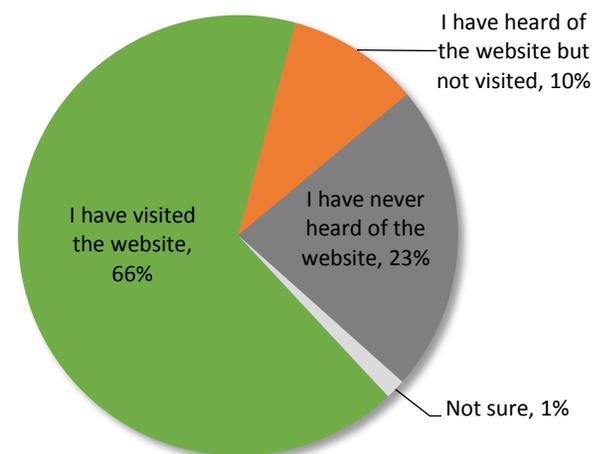
When asked about their interaction with engagestjohns.ca, 66 percent of citizens surveyed had visited the site while 23 percent indicated they had never heard of it. Sixty-three percent of those indicating they had visited the site were registered users (with a username and password). For those visitors that did not register, 51 percent indicated they had browsed the site and so did not need to register, 46 percent indicated they did not want to provide personal information, 43 percent indicated they didn't want to create an account, and 11 percent indicated the process of creating an account was too complicated (data based on 35 responses, multiple responses allowed). Several respondents indicated that registration was a deterrent.

Of survey respondents that had visited the site, 80 percent had done so more than once, with the majority of those visiting 2-3 times. Approximately three quarters of those visiting the site had browsed information on a specific project and/or completed a survey/voted in a poll. Fewer visitors participated in a discussion (17 percent) or asked a question (16 percent).

Visitors to engagestjohns.ca had very favourable views of the site, its design, content, and usability. Eighty-nine percent of survey respondents that had visited the site indicated it was a valuable tool for public engagement. However, when we asked how well engagestjohns.ca was meeting the goal of making

Public interaction with engagestjohns.ca site

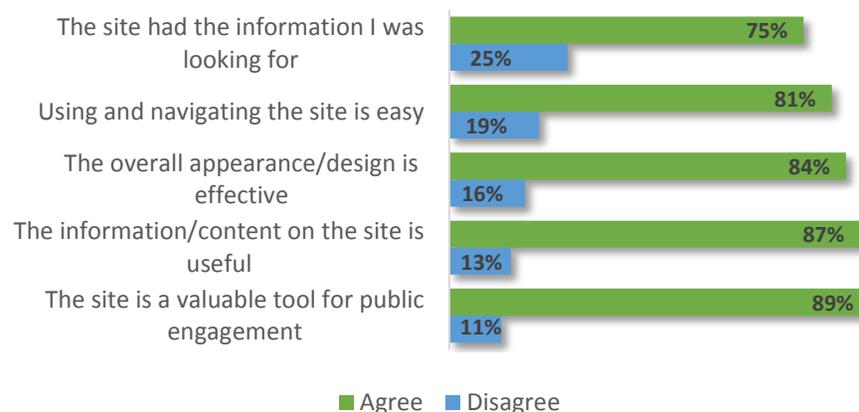
Survey results (n=340)



Note: the percentage of respondents visiting the site is likely higher than is true of the population in general as registered users of the site were emailed a survey invitation and therefore account for a larger portion of survey respondents.

Opinions of visitors to engagestjohns.ca

Survey results (n=217)



public engagement easier, more inclusive and more representative of public perspective, survey respondents rated the site as just a three out of five (where five was very effective).

Staff and Council perspective on engagestjohns.ca

City staff from across the organization that lead engagement projects value the engagestjohns.ca platform as a tool for gathering public input and reaching stakeholders that they may not reach through more traditional means, such as meetings. While all staff agree that an online engagement platform is critical to the City's overall engagement efforts, they also suggest that it is not the answer for every citizen or every project. Engagement tools used for a project must fit the target audience. Councillors surveyed also expressed this view.

Staff have used many of the online tools or widgets available in the platform, the most commonly used being Frequently Asked Questions, Document Library, Links, Key Dates, Project Life Cycle, and Q & A. These tools generally work well for staff.

One City staff person serves as the main site administrator for engagestjohns.ca and is responsible for overseeing the site, creating project pages, dealing with technical issues, liaising with the service provider, and providing training and ongoing support to staff across the organization. In their review of engagestjohns.ca, the following observations were made:

- There are limitations to the current site's survey tool. Simple quick polls are effective, however, more complex surveys are best built in a separate platform (this requires the City to purchase another account with a survey

platform provider meaning survey responses are not tracked on engagestjohns.ca and hence not included in the site's analytics).

- Registered users are currently attached to a specific project page (rather than the home page) which can create a challenge when targeting users by project for follow-up newsletters and notifications.
- It would be helpful if analytics and reports could be generated separately for public projects and protected projects (protected projects are used by City Advisory Committees and other working groups and are only open to their members).
- The site guestbook is problematic in that comments cannot be responded to on the page.
- Periodic webinars by Engagement HQ would be valuable for staff and would aid in building internal capacity for engagement.
- The ability to notify users when new information is posted to the site is currently limited to creating and sending newsletters. This requires the site administrator to log on and follow a series of steps, including having to choose recipients. This process is less than ideal and detracts from the City's ability to follow-up with users and keep them engaged on the projects they are interested in.

Review of engagestjohns.ca by Engagement HQ

A “peer review” of the engagestjohns.ca site was conducted by the team at Engagement HQ with the following observations:

- Overall, the site is being used fairly effectively by the City in that a variety of tools are used and registrations are increasing.
- Improving engagement is mainly about getting more people registered on the site and this could be accomplished through increased promotion and leveraging stakeholders and Council as much as possible.
- Promotion of the site involves finding a balance between letting citizens know about the site while at the same time not fatiguing them. A video is to a good tool for increasing registrations.
- Updating the site to the available “tiles” design used by other municipalities would give it a fresher, modern look.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Since the adoption of the City’s engagement policy and framework 27 projects with engagement plans have been completed, the City has heard from thousands of citizens, and trained staff from across the organization. While the feedback and data we’ve collected as part of the evaluation tells us that progress has been made, there is more we can do to increase the effectiveness of our public engagement, make it more meaningful for the public and effective for staff, and ensure clarity in how it informs City decisions. Twelve recommendations are offered below. These recommendations must be considered

in the context of the City’s relatively limited engagement staff resources and budget. In addition, following from the Engage! Task Force report in 2014 a working group was established to review engagement specifically related to development – recommendations from this group are forthcoming.

1. Continue to enhance the staff engagement toolkit and provide additional training to aid in more effective engagement planning, execution, and evaluation

There is an opportunity to develop an enhanced staff toolkit and provide additional training to build on competencies and address the uncertainties some staff are experiencing. There is often confusion amongst staff regarding the distinction between engagement and communications. A revised and enhanced staff toolkit and associated training could help staff better understand the public engagement continuum (from inform to empower). The toolkit and training should also provide direction on how to:

- clearly define decision points for engagement projects;
- identify the most appropriate engagement tools;
- identify and contact external stakeholders;
- identify and contact internal resources for assistance;
- set measureable goals for the engagement;
- conduct a post-engagement evaluation (an evaluation template should be developed for use by staff);
- clearly articulate and communicate the intent of the public engagement project to participants;
- ensure participants understand their scope of influence - what can and cannot be influenced by engagement.

Additional tools and training can help staff better understand their roles and accountabilities in the engagement process and help build greater internal capacity for, and commitment to, public engagement.

2. **Increase awareness of engagement opportunities and the engagestjohns.ca platform as a means of increasing public participation**

Awareness is key to public participation. A communications plan, developed in 2014, should be revisited, refreshed, and fully implemented to help increase awareness of the City's engagement activities, and the opportunities that exist to participate, including online at engagestjohns.ca. The plan must include tactics that can effectively reach diverse target populations but also consider how to access 'hard to reach' or more marginalized segments of the population.

Consideration should be given to how existing neighbourhood groups or associations can be leveraged to build community capacity. The communications plan must incorporate findings from the public survey conducted as part of this engagement evaluation, particularly the data collected on preferred methods of contact. The plan must also consider how to increase the number of registered users at engagestjohns.ca.

3. **Implement a subscription-based email service dedicated to public engagement**

Respondents to the public survey indicated that the most effective way to let them know about upcoming engagement events was via a subscription-based email service. The City

has the ability to implement this type of service almost immediately and it should be a priority. It will be necessary, however, to ensure appropriate communication is carried out to encourage citizens to subscribe. Once implemented this service will provide a very effective means of building awareness of public engagement events, increasing participation, and enabling post-event follow-up.

4. **Improve tools and processes that enable effective reporting back to citizens (closing the loop)**

The public survey conducted as part of the evaluation, indicated that post-engagement follow-up is a concern for participants and must be improved. Engagement cannot be effective if it does not 'close the loop' and inform participants about decisions and outcomes in a timely manner.

In most cases, the City produces a '*what we heard*' document after an engagement process is concluded. However, survey results indicate that many participants were not aware of this document and hence felt that follow-up had not occurred. The proposed subscription based email service referenced in recommendation #3, will aid considerably in post-event follow-up. In addition, an outcomes tab should be added to each project page on engagestjohns.ca to provide information on progress and outcomes. Other methods of reporting back to citizens should also be considered including producing an annual report on the year's public engagement activities.

5. **Maintain and enhance the online engagement platform**

Providing input online is a preferred method of engagement for many, hence, the City must continue to maintain an online engagement platform. The current platform provided by Engagement HQ meets most of the City's requirements, however, there are issues regarding the survey tool, user notifications, and account registrations that detract from the effectiveness of the platform. These issues have been discussed with Engagement HQ. The City is currently investigating other platforms and should continue to do so as the current contract expires on December 31, 2017. In the interim, the City should investigate implementing the more modern "tiles design" for the site as recommended by Engagement HQ.

6. **Enhance the collection and storage of participant data for engagement projects**

The current participant sign-in and evaluation/feedback process for in-person engagement events is problematic. It is difficult to capture all attendees, particularly when the event has a drop-in format, and the current manual process leads to incomplete or illegible data. Participant data from the online platform is readily available but is stored separately. Staff should develop a new data collection and storage system that streamlines collection and permits all participant data to be stored in one location, readily available for reporting. Poor data detracts from the City's ability to report on and evaluate its engagement.

7. **Support members of Council with information, tools, and resources on public engagement**

Council can be champions for public engagement but they, like staff, require ongoing information, supports and tools. Public engagement is now included in new Council orientation, however, additional supports should be considered, including offering new Councillors the International Association for Public Participation course *Public Engagement for Decision Makers*.

8. **Create a Citizen's Guide to Public Engagement**

To aid in public awareness, increase community capacity, and facilitate greater understanding of the engagement process, a Citizen's Guide to Public Engagement should be developed. This guide would include information on how the City's engagement framework works, and most importantly how public input is used in decision-making. Increasing understanding of the engagement process can help build trust between the City and the public it serves.

9. **Measure performance and focus on evaluation and continuous improvement**

Evaluation of the City's engagement projects and activities must be ongoing. Projects must have measureable goals and the extent to which these goals are achieved must be evaluated. The staff engagement toolkit must include a guide to evaluation, as referenced in recommendation #1. This focus on evaluation and continuous improvement fits with the City's core value of continuing to do things better and is in line with its newly adopted accountability framework.

To aid in ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement, consideration should be given to establishing a citizen panel or committee that can provide ongoing feedback on the City's engagement framework and activities.

10. Investigate the feasibility of creating a central stakeholder list

Staff are often challenged to identify and connect with stakeholders, for example, business associations, neighbourhood groups, and seniors' organizations. Various departments across the City maintain contact information, but no centralized source exists. The City should further investigate how to better manage and maintain stakeholder information to be used across the organization as this is essential to ensuring engagement is inclusive and effective.

11. Establish an annual round-table for staff

There is an opportunity to develop an annual round-table meeting for staff who are leading projects with engagement so they can share best practices, identify challenges, and recommend solutions. This annual check-in will help foster connections, build additional capacity, and create a culture of engagement.

12. Include City Advisory Committees in engagement projects on a more regular basis

The City currently has six Advisory Committees comprised of city staff, the general public, and representatives of community organizations. Members have diverse backgrounds, are knowledgeable, and keen to participate. They offer a convenient and expedient source of input.



3 WATER STREET REFRESH DESIGN STUDIO



4 FOCUS GROUP WITH ELEMENTARY STUDENTS - KENMOUNT TERRACE COMMUNITY PARK

APPENDIX A

City of St. John's Projects with Public Engagement 2014-2017

Public Engagement Projects:

2014:

1. First World War Legacy Project
2. GoBus Workshop
3. Mayor's Advisory Committee on Crime Prevention
4. Maximizing the Real Estate Potential of Upper Stories in the Downtown
5. DRAFT Municipal Plan
6. Seniors' Forum
7. Southlands Community Centre Programming

2015:

8. 2016 - 2018 Budget
9. Local Immigration Partnership
10. MUN Traffic Study
11. Victoria Park
12. Water St. Revitalization
13. Winter Maintenance Review

2016:

14. Bike St. John's Public Opinion Survey
15. 2017 Budget
16. Landlord Survey
17. Paul Reynolds Community Centre Programming
18. Torbay Road Area Transportation Study

2017:

19. Affordable Housing Business Plan
20. Automated Garbage Collection
21. Capital Construction Projects
22. Century Park
23. Community Market
24. Draft Development Regulations
25. Kenmount Terrace Community Park
26. Linegar Ave Upgrades
27. Traffic Pilot Projects