OUR CITY. OUR FUTURE.

EngageStJohns.ca

Evaluation Report



Completed by: Organizational Performance and Strategy
2023

ST. JOHN'S

Background

- EngageStJohns.ca supports transparency and increases public accessibility to information and engagement opportunities related to various City projects and more recently some planning applications.
- 2022 Resident Satisfaction Survey indicated that only 13% of City residents had used EngageStJohns.ca.
- Of those residents, 43% gave a satisfaction rating of 8 or higher in relation to Engage and 66% reported satisfaction of 7 or higher.
- Use of EngageStJohns.ca has expanded since its implementation but there continue to be opportunities for increased awareness and use by residents.
- Evaluation will help determine what is working well, what improvements could be made, and how other municipalities across the country are using the EngagementHQ platform that we can learn from.

Evaluation Methods

- Survey for the public
- Quick Poll open to the public
- Communications with City staff
- Survey for members of the Municipal P2 Network in Canada
- Review of other Canadian municipal engagement websites

Feedback from the Public Survey: Awareness

- 83% indicated they were aware of EngageStJohns.ca; 14% had never heard of the website; 3% were unsure
- 75% of those aware of EngageStJohns.ca had visited the website
- Of the 14% who were not aware of EngageStJohns.ca, 97% were interested in providing feedback to the City
- 40% of those not aware were between the ages of 31-45; 34% indicated they are often not aware of public engagement activities

n = 245

Feedback from the Public Survey: Awareness

- Respondents were asked to identify the project pages they recalled seeing.

Project	% of Respondents
Shared Use Paths	67.30%
Pedestrian Mall	61.01%
Water Street Infrastructure Project	43.40%
Traffic Calming Policy Update	42.14%
Downtown Neighbourhood Plan	40.25%
Heritage Plan	30.82%
20 Janeway Place	29.56%
Gleneyre Street Culvert Replacement	16.35%
All of the above	9.43%
Other	8.18%
None of the above	1.26%

n = 159

Feedback from Public Survey: Accounts

- 75% of those familiar with EngageStJohns.ca were registered users (n=159)
- 40% of respondents who have not created an EngageStJohns.ca account indicated they can find the information they are looking for without an account; 40% were not comfortable providing the personal information required (n=15)

Feedback from Public Survey: Accounts

Survey respondents who were not registered users were asked what would motivate them to become a registered user of EngageStJohns.ca. Suggestions included:

- Simple process of only providing name and email
- Receive only emails that are related to projects, preferably identifying projects in a user's neighbourhood as high priority
- Allow anonymous posts

One respondent noted that following projects without registering provided the information they needed.

n = 15

Feedback from Public Survey: Use

- 93% indicated they have used EngageStJohns.ca to read information about a project;
- 65% have provided feedback on a project through EngageStJohns.ca;
- 19% have used the site to ask a question about a project

n = 159

Feedback from Public Survey: Notifications

- 79% of registered users indicated the newsletters through Engage are timely; 18% were unsure
- 2% of registered users indicated they unsubscribed from EngageStJohns.ca newsletters
- 18% of registered users indicated they would like to receive notifications via text; 63% would not subscribe to text notifications
- Most respondents, regardless of age, would either not subscribe to text notifications or were unsure.

n = 120

Feedback from Public Survey: Satisfaction

- 82% of EngageStJohns.ca users were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the online tool; 10% indicated they were not satisfied
- 89% agreed that EngageStJohns.ca is easy to find
- 87% agreed project information on the site is easy to find
- 81% agreed that it is easy to find projects with open engagement
- 82% agreed the site is easy to navigate
- 89% agreed the information on the site is informative

n = 149

Feedback from Public Survey: Participation in Engagement

- 88% of all respondents indicated they were interested in providing feedback to the City about projects and services (n=208)
- Average interest in providing feedback on a scale of 1 (not at all interested) to 10 (very interested) was 8.2 (n=180)
- 87% indicated they are likely to provide feedback online; 61% through email; 33% in a meeting; 5 respondents noted they contact City councillors or staff directly to provide feedback (n=175)

Feedback from Public Survey: Participation in Engagement

- More than 80% of respondents are interested in providing feedback for all types of projects – projects in my neighbourhood, projects that have the potential to impact everyone in the City, and projects that are of interest to them (n=175)
- 60% indicate they hear about engagement opportunities through EngageStJohns.ca email or website; 42% through news outlets; 38% through City website or notifications; 34% through City social media channels (n=200)

Feedback from Public Survey: 18-30 Year Olds

- 11% of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 30
- 81% had visited EngageStJohns.ca; 10% had never heard of the online platform
- 43% were not members of the City Influencers
- 58% were somewhat likely to participate in engagement activities not related to City Influencers and 42% were very likely.

n = 21

Feedback from Public Survey: Open-Ended Comments (1/4)

Accounts

- Allow anonymous posts/don't require registered accounts.
- Easier login/not have to provide personal information.
- Don't require personal information for login.
- Registration can be a barrier. Consider limited engagement without requiring login.
- When logging in from a project page, have the system allow you to stay on that page and not return you to the homepage.

Finding and Promoting Engage

- Needs a direct and obvious link on the City website or have engagement opportunities within the City website.
- Should be firstly identified with the City name, not Engage.
- Promote this website more.
- Improved communication about public engagement opportunities and projects on the City agenda. Not a website issue but need better communication.
- More communication and promotion about the projects and how the feedback provided was used or considered.

Feedback from Public Survey: Open-Ended Comments (2/4)

EngageStJohns.ca Layout

- Make the front page more accessible; improve layout for those with visual impairments; current layout is confusing.
- Make it easier to find the projects that have open engagement.
- Projects with similar names can become confusing.
- Should be kept simple so that as many people as possible are able to conveniently access the opportunity to share their ideas.

Project Information

- Make the current stage of engagement clearer for each project.
- Ensure project information is comprehensive and the links to background information are provided.
- Have more timely updates on projects (e.g. Rennies River flood mitigation).
- Acknowledge when ideas/discussions are posted so that users know they are being read. Have more frequent updates on projects once they move past the planning stage and are in progress.
- Project updates should be holistic, explaining how it fits into the broader plan for those who aren’t aware.

Feedback from Public Survey: Open-Ended Comments (3/4)

Providing Feedback

- Make it easier to leave comments; increase the amount of text you can use.
- Provide more time to give feedback and send reminders.
- Show why providing feedback and participating in engagement is important and acknowledge feedback.
- Clearly explain how findings are being used and how they have implemented decision making/policy.
- Appreciate being able to provide feedback, see the background and consultation process and have a voice in the community.

Providing Feedback (cont'd)

- It is worth the effort to seek input from citizens.
- Have more ability to engage online.
- It was commented by some that the request for feedback is a formality and feel that many decisions are already made before public engagement begins.
- Online process is too long and too wordy.
- Online tools are not convenient for those who do not access the Internet. It can be difficult to know about a project if you're not online.
- It is important to listen to the feedback provided.

Feedback from Public Survey: Open-Ended Comments (4/4)

Engagement Process

- Consider how we can better connect with newcomers or seniors who may not have English as a first language or have online access.
- Would like to see more use of the engagement process to inform the public about changes and proposals that affect them, such as an experts panels section to expand on work by the various specialist committees.
- Engage citizens as much as possible and listen to them. Sometimes it feels as if engagement is simply a bit of window dressing and that decisions have already been made.
- At times it feels like there is too much engagement. For example, engagement occurred on the Bike Plan and engagement occurs for many projects within it.

Notifications

- Direct contact should be made with households who are directly affected by a plan or project, as not everyone is online.
- Would prefer not to receive notifications about projects where feedback options are not open or where I have already provided feedback.

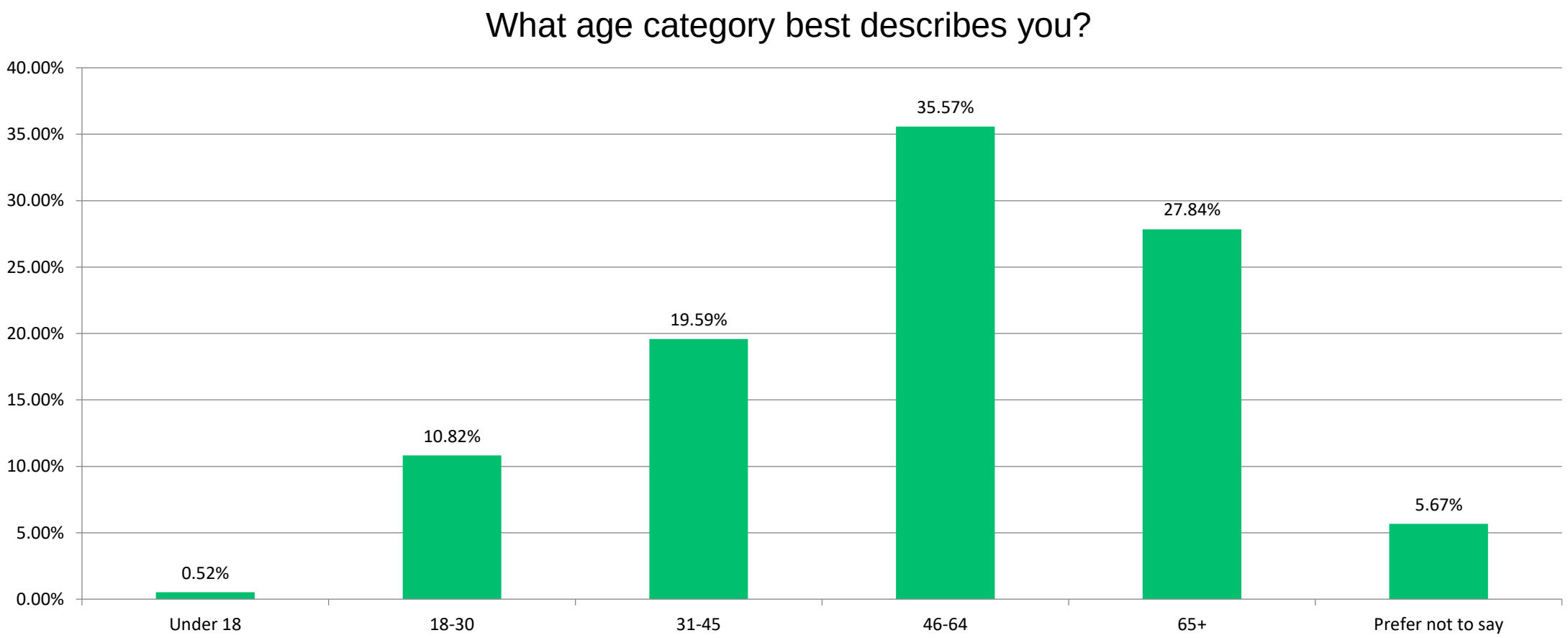
Other Feedback

- Information on the platform allows a more in depth look into other documents such as engineering reports and Provincial Government assessments.
- EngageStJohns.ca should be neutral and present projects in an unbiased manner.
- Some respondents indicated no changes were needed.

Feedback from Public Survey: Other Comments

- It was commented that the City website isn't updated frequently enough, such as providing updated bike paths.
- Based on some feedback, it seems unclear for some users how to find EngageStJohns.ca from the City website.
- It was noted that more promotion of EngageStJohns.ca is needed.
- Some respondents indicated more communications about public engagement opportunities is needed.
- It was noted that mail outs to neighbourhoods regarding planning issues often do not include pertinent information and info provided is often incorrect.
  - (Staff Note: planning application notifications were outside the scope of this review)

Public Survey: Age Categories



n=194

Public Quick Poll

- 43% indicated EngageStJohns.ca provides **all** of the information they are looking for
- 47% indicated EngageStJohns.ca provides **some** of the information they are looking for
- 10% indicated they can’t find the information they are looking for on EngageStJohns.ca

n=156

Feedback from City Staff (1/2)

- Staff indicated the EngageStJohns.ca project pages for capital projects were useful to reference when the public asked questions about a project, even for those capital projects without engagement activities; not all projects without engagement would benefit from a project page but some of the larger projects do.
- It was noted that there is a diverse group of people who are using EngageStJohns.ca to connect with the City about projects.
- Tools on Engage, such as the Ideas tool, can help reduce the number of inquiries. Individuals can see suggestions by others and respond to those, creating more of a dialogue.
- Standardized process and format helps staff provide a consistent level of information for various projects.

Feedback from City Staff (2/2)

- Staff value the EngageStJohns.ca page. They indicated it was a positive tool in communicating with the public and making information readily available to the public.
- It was indicated that creating project pages for larger, high impact capital projects is beneficial.
- Overall, staff agreed that the benefits of creating project pages and using EngageStJohns.ca was worth the time.

Feedback from Municipal Network Survey (1/2)

- 14 of 18 municipalities who replied to the survey use EngagementHQ/Bang the Table which is the same as the City's platform.
- Majority of municipalities indicated that the number of engagements on a project is project/topic dependent and ranges can be quite large. For some, projects that are more City-wide and have the potential to impact more residents will have more engagement.
- There were different perspectives on providing how-to videos and user guides to help navigate the engagement website.
- One municipality noted that they have been experimenting with not requiring registration for engagement participation and this has generally result in higher engagement numbers.

Feedback from Municipal Network Survey (2/2)

- Number of projects per year on a municipality's online engagement platform also varies, depending on the year. One municipality noted that all development applications also receive a project page for engagement.
- Of the 14 respondents that indicated how they promote their engagement platform and projects, 10 indicated they promote through social media; 5 use digital and physical signs; 5 use email/newsletters to promote.
- Municipalities also reported using other promotion methods such as newspaper and bus ads, registration contests, attending festivals and events, and through City committees.

Observations of Other Municipalities using Bang the Table Platform (1/2)

- Registration is commonly required to participate in at least some engagement activities.
- Information required for registration varies from just postal code and email to age, gender, ward and highest level of education.
- Different layouts are used on the front page to organize projects. Examples include categories such as:
  - Open for input, active, past projects
  - Featured conversations, past conversations
  - Active Projects, with an All Projects tab where archived projects can also be found
- No municipality reviewed uses a project search/project showcase function on the front page; general search bar is on the top menu bar
- Some municipalities do not display dates on project tiles on front page. Project tile dates reflect when the project was started and not when it was last updated.
- No document library on front page observed for other municipalities.

Observations of Other Municipalities using Bang the Table Platform (2/2)

- Widgets used by other municipalities were similar to those used on EngageStJohns.ca
- Custom widgets were noted for two municipalities that identified the level of engagement for the project.
- Some municipalities have a video on their Engage page to explain what public engagement is and why it’s important.

Observations

- Most public respondents have a high interest in providing feedback to the City.
- There are opportunities to further promote EngageStJohns.ca and public engagement tools and projects more generally.
- Anonymous feedback is used periodically by some municipalities, including St. John’s, but need to consider any impacts this may have on how the data can be used.
- There are multiple ways to subscribe and receive notifications across both the City website and EngageStJohns.ca.
  - There are more than 900 subscribers to the Public Engagement section of the City website and subscribers may think this is connected to EngageStJohns.ca but the two platforms are not connected.
- Clarity on purpose of EngageStJohns.ca vs the City website is required.

Recommendations

- Work with Communications staff to develop a new communications plan and brand for EngageStJohns.ca.
- Explore possibilities for anonymous participation for some tools on EngageStJohns.ca.
- Develop communications about why engagement is important and how feedback is used.
- Explore options for new front-page layout with Engagement HQ.
- Establish internal review process to determine project status of all project pages and ensure project leads have provided up-to-date information and close the loop as projects move beyond what we heard to decision making and implementation.
- Follow-up with vendor to determine if some suggested changes can be made in the system.
- Further investigate possibility of text notifications for those who are interested.

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Next Steps:

- Determine recommendations that can be actioned and develop action plan with appropriate timelines, in consultation with internal stakeholders.

