Community Consultation For Quality of Life in England

CCQOL

University of **Reading**

UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council

Acknowledgements

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https://www.qolf.org/	https://www.commonplace.is/	https://urbansymbiotics.com/

Executive Summary

Research summary:
making connections across communities

The Your Place, Our Place project in Reading was the first urban room project for Community Consultation for Quality of Life - a research programme running across the four nations. It was the test bed for providing a place in an urban area where people from different local communities could come together to talk about the past, the present and the future of the town in which they live, work and visit.

The aim of the urban room in Reading was to provide a place for local communities to showcase their groups, to organise meetings, and provide a shared space for discussion and engagement with the rest of the town community. The process of setting up and running 'Your Place Our Place' has clearly shown that communities want to be part of a space to host their conversations and discussions about their town. In just a few months, over 60 organisations came forward to be part of the space in some way.

The research shows that this type of community facility can offer a safe, inclusive space for communities to describe who they are, increase participation and to be consulted about what they feel is important. A community space such as 'Your Place Our Place' provides a way to regenerate our sense of place in our communities.

Importantly, the urban room at Reading was developed by building on the existing relationships between the local authority, the university, local business, and local communities. The urban room offered various opportunities to all of these groups to work together, to support one another, to disseminate information, share finance or business expertise and to provide ideas for the future of the town and region. As such, the urban room can be an important factor to build on existing strong community links.

Alongside the urban room, the project explored the regulatory and policy landscape for community engagement in England. This exploration led the team to conclude that, despite the previous emphasis of governmental and regulating bodies on consultation, there is a lack of centralised guidance on how to facilitate engagement processes. As such, tools and guidance to support the engagement process and the approach to participatory design in particular would be important developments to support the evolution of community consultation in England.

Community Consultation For Quality of Life

Your Place, Our Place was part of a UK-wide research project, Community Consultation for Quality of Life (CCQOL) funded by the Arts and Humanities and Research Council (AHRC).

CCQOL was initiated by Professor Flora Samuel, based on the belief that creating maps of local assets - the places people value most in their communities - is a good way to involve local communities in co-creating local knowledge about their area.

Applying the Quality of Life Foundation's Framework themes of Control, Health, Nature, Wonder, Movement and Belonging in a Commonplace online mapping platform, a map-based approach aimed to test how creating local knowledge through community consultation can help inform longer-term decisions about future development and improvements in our communities.

Research questions

How can community consultation be made more useful and effective across the diverse policy contexts of the UK?

How can community consultation be made more representative and inclusive?

How can community consultation be undertaken for areas that have not yet been developed, when 'future users' are not known?

What are the relative benefits of online and physical community consultation?

How can community consultation be made into a long-term project that fosters ongoing civic debate?

How can social value mapping inform the process of community consultation?

What format could community consultation take in a pandemic?

What terminology is needed to describe inclusive, empowering 21st century community consultation?

Project methodology

The project addressed these questions using several means. The team planned, delivered, and evaluated four physical 'urban rooms' in four UK cities: Reading, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast. Urban rooms are defined by the Urban Room Network as spaces 'where people can come together to help create a future for their local area'.

Alongside these urban rooms, the team used Commonplace online mapping platforms and surveys to engage with local communities. Each city had its own approach, and this approach was informed by a policy literature review specific to each nation. Additionally, we conducted interviews with local planning and community representatives and established Local Advisory Groups in each city.

Key statistics from the Reading urban room

The urban room hosted interactions with more than

12,000

people

67%

of survey respondents have never participated in a planning consultation before

Over
60%

of those people hadn't taken part in a planning consultation before because they'd never been asked to

The gender split of attendees was almost equal

67%

of survey respondents identified 'feeling part of a community' as a benefit of participating in a consultation

Over
74%

of respondents felt strongly that they should be allowed to express an opinion on planning in a part of town where they may not live

When asked about preferences for being consulted on the planning decisions,

51%

preferred to have the option to do this either face to face or online

Recommendations from the Reading project:

1. Ensure inclusive approaches to consultation

2. All communities need a constant consultative space

3. Be creative to minimise consultation fatigue

4. Be careful about the language used to describe the activity of participation

5. Facilitate early engagement in the consultation process and enable participation throughout

6. Dedicate funding to support community consultation

7. Create a statutory requirement for structured, timely engagement

8. Always feedback to the community about outcomes of their engagement

9. Share best practice of community consultation and engagement

10. Review existing processes and practices of consultation, involving local community representatives

Contents

Context

Introduction

This report, on improving community consultation in planning in England, is one of a series of four reports based on the nations of the UK. It was developed as part of Community Consultation for Quality of Life an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project led by the University of Reading in collaboration with the Cardiff, Edinburgh, and Ulster Universities. This project seeks to influence the way in which community knowledge is operationalised through planning consultation, hence the use of the word consultation, as opposed to engagement or participation which are about more long term relationships with communities.

The work was developed through a desk top literature review (Lawson et al, 2021), interviews with stakeholders, the development of experimental 'urban rooms' consultation spaces and the making of digital maps with communities in all four nations to develop and test inclusive best practice.

1.1 Historical context of community consultation in England

1.1.1 Origins of consultation

Community consultation has long been a recognised concept within the English planning and architecture industries. Stemming from the 1960's, such theories of civic participation were initially popularised by research from the US, part of a broader political shift at the time calling for governments to 'widen and deepen participation' (Parker, G. & Street, E. 2017) (Healey, 2003; Cleaver, 1999; Cleaver et al, 2001). Sherry Arnstein's seminal journal article 'A ladder of citizen participation' in 1969 prompted governments to consider the role of end users within decision making processes. With a background in the US department of health, education, and welfare, Arnstein articulated a model 'for understanding how the degree of citizen participation in government can affect public perceptions of legitimacy, authority and good governance' (Kusi, 2021). In the article, Arnstein emphasised the importance of redistributing power to citizens, without which she states, 'participation is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless' (Arnstein, 1969). Although the ladder of participation is a vertical ladder, in practice the process may be more horizontal and inclusive rather than a vertical process or hierarchical process.

1.1.2 Origins of consultation in England: The Town and Country Planning Act, 1968 and The Skeffington Report, 1969

Within England, the growth of this political theory is reflected in the grey literature produced at the time. The Town and Country Planning Act of 1968 addressed consultation directly within Planning systems, 'the first area of government in the UK to be subject to such provisions' (Brownill & Inch, 2019). Here, a legal requirement for planning authorities to publicise their development plans and provide opportunities for consultation was introduced (Brownill & Inch, 2019). In light of this, the government commissioned Arthur Skeffington to produce a report providing guidance and recommendations on how public engagement could be best implemented within British Planning. This formulated as the seminal People and Planning Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning, commonly known as the Skeffington Report, published in 1969.

This became the first instance of community consultation and a recognition of the right to participation within British governance, and emphasised the importance of engaging with society at the very start of development projects. On publication, the report was criticised as 'inadequate' due to its ambiguous wording and lack of clarity on the implementation of consultation methods in practice. However, despite this vagueness, it is often cited as inspiring a new generation of planners, designers, and activists (Community Planning, 2022) and has subsequently had a long-term impact on the growth of consultation across the nation.

1.1.3 Early movement within architecture and planning

Such inspiration can be found within the architectural profession, where consultation and participatory design methods gained prominence as architects increasingly looked to 'redress the balance of power between the architect and the user' (Spatial Agency, 2022) which had become increasingly unequal during the Modern movement. This formulated itself in projects such as Ralph Erskine's 1970's Byker Wall development. Here, the architect was integrated into the neighbourhood for the duration of the project and an open-door community office allowed residents to raise issues and discuss future proposals.

Simultaneously, and running concurrently to this movement in architecture, consultation was also growing within planning. NGO Planning Aid was set up by the Town and Country Planning Association in 1973 to support community consultation within planning processes. Run primarily by volunteer members of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), and still running today, Planning Aid England (PAE) look to 'provide planning advice and support to help individuals and communities engage with the planning system and get involved in planning their local area' (Royal Town Planning Institute, 2022). Such projects and organisations across the professions pioneered consultation approaches to design within the nation.

1.1.4 The 'long-crisis'

However, despite this long history, the debate on participation and advocacy in local governance and planning continues, with widespread advocacy and effective support still largely unattained across the nation (Parker & Street, 2017). Over fifty years after the start of the participatory movement and Arnstein's article, techniques adopted to involve communities within planning decisions can, at a broad scale, still be seen as 'paying little more than lip service' (Alwaer & Cooper, 2009). Many of the ambiguities the Skeffington Report was criticised for 53 years ago, are still yet to be clearly addressed by a government. As such, the debate on how and when to involve communities continues.

1.2 Policy

England has a 'plan-led system', where local authorities produce development plans which set out planning policies. A duty to consult was first introduced into English planning systems within the Planning Act 2008. Since this, the Localism Act of 2011, the Planning for the Future White Paper 2020, and the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (LURB) released by the government in 2022 and enacted in 2023 have further specified a national approach to community engagement within the planning system.

1.2.1 The Planning Act (2008)

The Planning Act 2008 established a pre-application duty to consult for projects over a certain size, setting a new requirement for planning applications to include a Statement of Community Consultation/Involvement. These must include a consultation strategy, outlining the purpose of consultation, who will be consulted with, how they intend to consult and how they will respond and incorporate community feedback. Different local authorities can request different levels of engagement for their areas.

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) was also introduced within the Act. CIL is 'a levy that local authorities can choose to charge on new developments in their area' (PAS, 2022) to support and fund council, local community and neighbourhood supported infrastructure. This was an extension of the existing Section 106 (S106) which was used to mitigate the impact of developments on local communities and infrastructure, and provides funds for local transport, flood defences, schools, hospitals and other health and social care facilities (HM Government, 2008). However, the introduction of this has widely been criticised for its implementation, and issues such as 'time spent negotiating agreements, the "dark art" of viability discussions and inefficiency in capturing land value uplift' (Gilbey and Thomas, 2020).

1.2.2 Localism Act (2011)

The 2011 Localism Act, brought in under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government, details an explicit duty to consult in English planning systems, building upon and clarifying the requirements of the Planning Act 2008. In a period of national austerity following the financial crisis of 2008, this act, part of the government's 'Big Society' plans, introduced a neo-liberalist approach to planning. Through shifting decision-making powers away from government bodies and into the hands of communities, the act sought to reduce planning time and deliver projects faster, (with a particular focus on housing) through 'building consensus around the need for more homes and infrastructure investments deemed necessary to deliver growth and economic prosperity' (Centre for Cities, delivering change 2014).

A key tool associated with the Localism agenda in England is Neighbourhood Planning (NP). In essence, Neighbourhood Planning provides a system for communities to develop a 'statutory planning document' (Parker et al, 2020) in a form of 'bottom up' governance, devolving power to citizens and away from local and central government (Manuel & Vigar, 2021). Although similar concepts to neighbourhood plans were explored under the New Labour governments of 1997-2010, the new coalition government made policy initiatives state-enabled, rather than state-led (Gullino et al, 2019).

> "NP requires citizens to curate the process; gain input from the wider community to define problems and set agendas; develop policies and actions for the neighbourhood; and, ultimately, enable the plan to pass a community referendum."
>
> *(Manuel & Vigar 2021)*

Whilst in principle this provided citizens with more decision-making powers and was a step towards a more responsive, democratised planning sphere (Gallent and Robinson, 2012), it came with several major flaws; primarily, the intensive expectations put on members of the community as volunteers in terms of time and effort made the process challenging and inaccessible for many. Outside help, specialist expertise, in the form of engagement, training and consultation with specialist consultants is required for this process to successfully meet its potential due to the steep learning curve of jargon and 'regulatory hoops' volunteers must navigate. This raised questions over what is expected from residents as volunteers and created significant barriers to those with less time and resources to invest in the process. In essence, this shifted a focus away from deprived areas.

In response to the Act, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) published a Guide to Localism in 2011. Within it, the RIBA refer to community engagement as crucial "in building effective dialogue and developing a shared understanding of places and their potential" (RIBA, 2011). However, despite this recognition almost 10 years ago and although widely accepted as a crucial element in successful design and planning (Froud, 2017), community involvement and consultation within UK practice is still poorly reflected in studio culture in architecture design practices and processes.

1.2.3 National Planning Policy Framework for England (2019)

> **Early engagement has significant potential to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning application system for all parties. Good quality pre-application discussion enables better coordination between public and private resources and improved outcomes for the community.**
>
> *(NPPF 2019)*

1.2.4 Planning for the Future White Paper (2020)

In 2020, the government produced the Planning for the Future White Paper, which in their own words, promised to transform the planning system through a 'radical, digital-first approach' (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2020), broadening the reach of development plans and allowing for a more inclusive and involved process for communities. Within the document the government states they aim to 'support local authorities to radically rethink how they produce their Local Plans, and profoundly re-invent the ambition, depth, and breadth with which they engage with communities' (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2020), with a particular focus on social participation during the early design stages.

Although the details of how this is to be achieved are not presented, it is crucial that for this to be meaningfully and successfully implemented, lessons learned from current practice are not forgotten (Lynn et al, 2020). Here, it is important to consider potential issues that may arise within the engagement process such as contested or divided communities. With more opinions and voices come the increased and inevitable chance of disagreements. As professors in Urban Planning Tim Richardson and Steve Connelly write in their contribution to Peter Blundell Jones' Architecture and Participation, 'Participation does not necessarily lead to consensus' (Richardson & Connelly, 2005, p81).

This can test a participatory approach to design, and question whether, if a consensus cannot be reached, does this circle back to involvement as 'merely consultation to better inform the decision-makers' or even as they go on the pose, form 'a managed process of neutering conflict, masked by a rhetoric of inclusivity and consensus?' (Richardson & Connelly, 2005, p79).

Moreover, within these new plans, it is important that the current pre-application consultation is not lost, and enough time can be given to community outreach processes for 'trust to be fostered and conflict minimised' (Lynn et al, 2020). Within the document the speed and quantity of building is evidently prioritised, an element in itself which would be cause for concern; with the document stipulating a maximum of 30 months for development sites to go through the local planning process, and sanctions to be implemented for delays, there is likely to be a shift in priorities from 'meaningful' public engagement in the process to reinforcing a tick box form of public engagement. RIBA president at the time Alan Jones, in a statement responding directly to the White Paper, connected this infatuation with the speed of building alongside the extension of Permitted Development to leading 'to the creation of the next generation of slum housing' (Jones, 2020). He instead suggested, among other changes, giving 'local authorities power and resource to promote and safeguard quality' (Jones 2020).

Discussions around the future of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Section 106 (S106) agreements within the white paper go a small way as to acting on this. The document suggests a bold ambition to reform the system of developer contributions. In principle, this reform would help communities to continually fund necessary changes within their area, take ownership over decision making and promote quality.

1.2.5 Levelling up and Regeneration Act

Introduced to Parliament in May 2022, the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (LURA) which was given Royal assent in October 2023, seeks to place a greater emphasis on local voices in planning processes. In its own words, it will 'put the foundations in place for delivering this agenda and ensuring all parts of the country share equally in our nation's success' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022).

In some ways, the LURA begins to address some of the issues previously outlined within the neighbourhood planning process. The introduction of 'neighbourhood priorities statements', in their own words, looks to provide a 'simpler and more accessible way' (https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/our-work/levelling-and-regeneration-bill), for communities to engage with neighbourhood planning processes. Less extensive than a traditional neighbourhood plan, a neighbourhood priority statement is designed to allow communities to identify their key priorities for their local area, including their development preferences. In essence, the LURA is directly focused on enhancing the accessibility of consultation within planning processes for less affluent communities.

Alongside this new addition, the act also provides further details on Neighbourhood Planning and what can be included within a Neighbourhood Plan, seeking to clarify the requirements of the process.

In response to the consultation when the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act was still a bill, comments from the RTPI briefing note of 5 July 2023 requested that peers consider changes that:

> **Give communities a greater say through plan making...
> Improve England's planning services by reinstating
> permission for virtual planning committees.**

In the Government levelling up and regeneration consultation on implementation of plan making reforms published July 2023, Chapter 8 has a 'proposed approach' which has four themes, including the role of the digital tools. It suggests that there is 'the potential to improve the quality, quantity, and diversity of participation within local plans process when used in combination with traditional methods'. The government consultation also suggests a focus on early participation at the start of the planning process.

> " Modern digital engagement tools, combined with more consistent data, could reduce the time it takes to process representations, remove barriers to engagement and improve planning authorities' abilities to understand community views. "

The process of community consultation could be made much more accessible if a digital mapping system was used to show information about current and future planning scenarios. The idea of a physical space to complement this digital environment, like the idea of a real space, the urban room space, offers a truly accessible system of planning information though a hybrid approach of virtual and digital information.

There is also a comment from the RTPI in their response to the environmental outcomes reports and environmental appraisals in their briefing note of June 2023:

> " The introduction of a different regime for England, distinct from the alternative used in other nations, could create confusion for industry and difficulties on cross-border plans and projects. "

This comment was in reference to environmental appraisals; however, it is valid for many planning policies as projects can involve communities that move between the nations. Therefore careful consideration should be given to how planning policies involving communities in England, Scotland Wales and Northern Ireland differ, and what advantages there are to communities having similar consultation approaches where relevant.

1.3 Consultation delivery

Promoters of consultation within England range broadly from private developers, public agencies, landowners, or non-governmental agencies and as such, the delivery of consultation is spread across the spectrum of participation outlined by Arnstein in her ladder model of participation.

1.3.1 Tokenised consultation

At one end of the spectrum, which is often the default experience, participation can be more tokenised. In general, most communities' only chance to have a voice in local development plans is limited to the required consultation of a planning application (RIBA Stage 3). Here, participants can often feel that their contribution is required too late on in the project and as a 'tick-box' exercise rather than to genuinely listen to their concerns and contributions (Froud, 2017).

Although, as outlined above, recent government policy has regularly placed an emphasis on early-stage engagement (Localism Act 2011, Planning for the Future White Paper 2020) there is still a tendency for the first stage in plan-making to be behind closed doors. With this early stage missing, consultation processes can often be seen to adopt what is known in management fields as the 'Decide-Announce-Defend' model. This refers to a process where, having internally decided on a preferred solution, 'the proponent's efforts then focus on deciding how best to announce their decision and how to argue the pros and discount the cons' (Ogilvie, 2016). This model fails to allow communities to meaningfully contribute and conduces a fractious relationship and lack of trust between communities with designers and councils. In general, this is a trend reflected across the UK, and in many cases, has only been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, with restrictions on face-to-face meetings implemented, and evidently no process in place to move digital, community consultation was often omitted altogether, particularly in developer-led projects.

However, it is important to recognise the difficulties in implementing consultation processes and engagement strategies, and to recognise consultation is often omitted. Whilst a carefully planned engagement strategy can illustrate the predicted wider benefits (socially and otherwise) of a project and can help provide momentum and backing for community led projects, without previous experience on developing such processes, planning exercises can be resource heavy - both time consuming and costly. Although, through research, many frameworks developed by a variety of companies and bodies can be found online for practices to adopt, this saturated research field can, in itself, take time to study and learn from. Ultimately, this makes it more difficult for architects to propose participatory methods and design approaches to certain clients, particularly those primarily concerned with turnover, where this time and money can be difficult to justify.

Moreover, for some professionals, consultation and participatory design methods can cause fear due to a perceived lack of control over the design process and therefore a loss of value and purpose. With no experience working in such a manner many design professionals are also unaware of how to engage in more meaningful ways.

1.3.2 'Meaningful' consultation

However, at the other end of the spectrum, meaningful consultation is becoming more popular as research into its value becomes more widespread and acknowledged. Social enterprises such as Onion Collective and Glasshouse are working in bottom-up methods of planning and co-design to instil communities at the heart of developments. Such groups advocate for participatory methods of design and showcase models for its successful implementation. With the emerging trend to deliver social value in projects, the work of such groups demonstrates methods of how a successful consultation process can benefit both the developers and the local community, particularly highlighting methods of securing funding and local support for such processes.

1.3.3 Digitisation and technological growth

The growth and development of digital tools, aided by the COVID-19 pandemic, have also aided a wider uptake of consultation, and helped to broaden the reach of engagement processes to include a greater and more inclusive representation of the population. These new 'beyond text' methods of engagement include mapping, film making, and other more engaging and inclusive methods of consultation.

There is a range of digital tools and software developed to allow greater participation, from mapping software to online whiteboards and 'citizensourcing' (similar to crowdsourcing which engages crowds or groups working together to achieve an agreed goal, this approach taps into the collective intelligence of citizens to solve a problem).

Citizenlab is a citizen engagement platform encouraging those that use it to co- design their city and provides tools to support collecting data about the views of community and the public.

Catapult works to accelerate innovation for cities, transport and place leadership.

There are digital platforms such as Community Planit, an online platform that uses gamification to encourage participation in community consultation, to encourage different groups to take part in new modes of communication.

Moreover, there are examples of Citizen-led Initiatives and campaigning groups; for example, Just Space (London) who wrote a community led alternative plan for London in 2015. They involved 62 groups and organisations to develop a set of policy ideas. They ran meeting workshops over many years to develop common ground and a set of agreed policy ideas. They have been updating this document with versions produced in 2016, 2017, 2018 so that the ideas and suggestions had currency as the local plan changed.

Such methods can not only be seen to provide greater resilience within a post-pandemic world but can simultaneously provide a way of reaching greater audiences than ever before, particularly younger audiences (Lynn et al, 2020).

There are also specialist consultants who work with community groups to help support the delivery of their projects and offer communities, and professionals, delivering a project a set of expertise to ensure that communities are engaged effectively as a project develops.

The government's recent consultation on implementing planning reform in chapter 3, refers to ways to deliver better outcomes in form by communities and other stakeholders using digital processes (Levelling up and Regeneration Act 2023). There is a set of references to digital community engagement case studies in the levelling up housing communities (DLUHC) website on digital planning and there have been various collaborative pilot projects on digital community engagement.

In essence, these methods allow for a larger network of participants within English planning systems which therefore effectively dissolves power and decision making, by encouraging more participation. However, it is important to recognise that while for many, adopting digital tools allows for a more engaging and accessible route to contribution, for some it only exacerbates existing exclusions (Scafe-Smith, 2020). Those who have no access to digital services, tools or access to the internet.

An Ofcom report into online and media habits found that whilst most benefited from online services, 'lockdown had a greater effect on people who were digitally excluded' (Ofcom, 2021). With a rise in internet access came a bigger divide for those still left without (predominantly low socio-economic households and the elderly).

> **Whilst the internet has been a democratising force, the unequal distribution of this power must also be recognised, particularly with matters of democratic involvement.**
>
> *(Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones 2022)*

As such, digital approaches must not replace existing face-to-face engagement processes, but rather support them and extend their reach.

1.3.4 Post occupancy evaluation

Whilst this promotion of community consultation at earlier design stages is positive, the incorporation of participation in the later stages of projects and post-completion is just as significant. Post occupancy evaluation (POE), which can be broadly defined as 'the process of obtaining feedback on a building's performance in use' (BRE, 2022), can be seen to play a 'significant role in improving the products and processes of the construction industry and in ensuring fitness for purpose in terms of environmental and social needs over the long-term' (Hay et al, 2018).

Engaging with the public post-completion gives communities a chance to reflect on how well a project is or isn't working in use. This on-going process of engagement and consultation can provide the greatest level of resilience within an ever changing environment and can ensure a project remains responsive to its users and their changing needs. The process, a continual loop of learning and adapting, also allows architects and designers to develop their professional knowledge and consequently their value to clients. Consistently evaluating the consultation process will 'provide valuable feedback…on the best methods for engaging with groups in a particular area or the most appropriate times or venues' (Community Places, 2014).

However, whilst POE can use quantitative data to access environmental and energy efficiency information, it proves harder to create a system which can effectively measure social impact, a form which relies more on qualitative data sets. In addition, despite a general professional consensus for the incorporation of POE, many practitioners come up against challenges in its delivery:

> **Mainly concerning structural elements of the construction industry, such as speculative clients, design-and-build contracts, the diminution of the architect's authority in the design team, and insurance and liability issues, especially apparent in relation to profit-driven, short-termism which has limited time and resources for POE activities.**
>
> *(Hays et al, 2018)*

1.4 Consultation knowledge

Critics of the Skeffington Report in 1969 found fault with the emphasis of better education and communication at the expense of advice on the practical application of participation and consultation in professional settings. In many ways, this criticism remains relevant today, with a research gap between 'participation rhetoric in policies and participation as practiced at the operational level' (Alwaer & Cooper, 2020). In particular, researchers have called for a centralised, state-led articulation of a successfully participatory process, the lack of which so far Wargent and Parker argue has 'held back widespread innovation and progressive participation' (Wargent & Parker, 2018). The continued lack of which, it is argued, could risk reducing trust and confidence (Alwaer & Cooper, 2020) between the difficulties of integrating meaningful participation in practice. This includes practicalities such as the role of legal expertise in facilitating participation (Abbot, 2020), monitoring and assessing the requirements and demands put on volunteers, as well as signposting what consultation stages entail and how these are embedded and contribute to a larger consultation process and network (Alwaer & Cooper, 2020).

RIBA Guide to Localism (2011) Getting community engagement right, is a guide for professionals to help them understand their role in community engagement. The document suggests that architects can play a role as enablers of community consultation. It refers to participatory design as being an important method to engage communities to be part of the process of creating the environments in which they live. Trust is an important factor between communities and design professionals if a two way learning relationship is to be developed and which needs to be earned between all stakeholders of a project.

Through analysing the longer-term 'real world outcomes' (Manuel & Vigar, 2021) of effective consultation there can be more effective solutions that come from the local community. Neighbourhood Planning (NP) which was created by the Localism Act (2011) was intended to move away from planning-led solutions and move power to local citizens who know their neighbourhood best. NP can only work with citizen engagement and there is criticism (Parker and Salter 2017) that it is more middle class areas that are dominating the NP approach as they have the resources and networks to develop these citizen engagement platforms.

It is also important to recognise a general focus, particularly in government guidance, on consultation for housing development, driven by an ever increasing need for housing across the country. As such, much of the research and guidance on engaging with communities and end users is framed by this requirement.

This continual omitting of 'meaningful' consultation with the public can be a result of two main factors. The first is a general lack of knowledge on how to carry out consultation across the profession and the second is the challenges of justifying consultation to clients, tackling the implications of consultation can be seen as having on the length and ultimately the cost of a project.

In some instances:

> **Design-led events operating within a framework that favours the sponsors interests - private developers or local authorities - over those of local communities.**
>
> *(Alwaar and Cooper 2020)*

Despite the previous emphasis of governmental and regulating bodies on consultation, there is a lack of centralised guidance on how to facilitate engagement processes. The idea of co-production and partnerships between citizens, local government and local stakeholders such as community groups and business can support effective consultation. The local people know the places they live and work in and with support can be innovative and creative to solve local issues.

More tools and guidance to support the engagement process and the approach to participatory design in particular would be important developments to support the evolution of community consultation in England as well as sharing of best practice examples so this knowledge and experience can be built on for future consultations.

1.4.1 Research interviews

To support the development of this research, we conducted interviews with a range of experts from industry, academia, and a range of associated professions around planning and the built environment. The interviews were coded to a key set of themes including:

Community engagement and participation, terminology, accessibility to information.

These interviews have informed the text and structure of this report.

Lessons from Your Space, Our Space, Reading

Figure 1: The opening of the urban room at Reading March 2022

2.1 Aim of the urban room

As part of the research project, each of the four nations had an urban room or community consultation space, as a pop-up space for one month. It is a space where the community can debate and contribute to the future of their town or neighbourhood. The idea of the urban room has evolved from the Farrell review in 2014, which was a report commissioned by the government on the future of the built environment and suggested:

> "Every town and city should have a physical space where people can go to understand, debate, and get involved in the past, present and future of where they live, work and play. The purpose of these Urban Rooms is to foster meaningful connections between people and place, using creative methods of engagement to encourage active participation in the future of our buildings, streets, and neighbourhoods."
>
> *(Farrell Review 2014)*

The urban room idea is further developed by the Urban Room Network, a group of academics and experts that meets regularly to support development of these spaces across the UK. The network has developed a toolkit to support the process of setting up an urban room. This network has supported research, and also provided practical help and support for new urban rooms in a range of contexts, some are pop up to respond to a particular community issue, other permanent spaces which act as a focus for community.

A successful urban room should be co-produced with the community, so that it reflects their interests and issues. This ensures that the community is part of the design of the consultation. For the CCOQOL urban rooms, the space was based somewhere accessible, with a curated set of activities, determined by each local community. In Reading, the urban room was situated in a shopping centre in the middle of the town. This offered a space that was readily available to the local community during the day and at weekends.

The aim of the urban room in Reading was to provide a place for local communities to showcase their groups, offer a place for them to organise meetings and a shared space for discussion and engagement with the rest of the town community. The process of setting up and running 'Your Place Our Place' in Reading, including the pop-up urban room in the Broad Street Mall, has clearly shown that communities want to be part of a space to host their conversations and discussions about their town. In a few months, over 60 organisations have come forward to be part of the space in some way.

An Urban room steering group was established to support the development of the project. It comprised :

- Members of Reading Borough Council

- Members of local business community

- Members from the local enterprise partnership

- Representatives from local community groups

- University of Reading Community Engagement team

- Owners of the Shopping Centre, the Moorgarth Group

- Members of the local climate action group

They were very supportive through the project, offering advice and information to develop a relevant theme for the urban room and also advice during the operation of the space. They worked with the research team to try to ensure that we included as many voices and groups as possible in the urban room process and presentations.

The first question for the research project team was to develop a theme for the urban room that could be shared by the community. Initial discussions with local groups, including the local council and various community groups, suggested a series of ideas including a focus on mental health and the impact of climate change on the town and region. These were subjects that were affecting all communities in Reading. Reading Borough Council was just producing a town centre strategy to inform the development of the local plan. This strategy identified a series of topics that were affecting local communities. These topics were Health and Wellbeing, Culture and Heritage, Climate Change and the Future of Business. These subjects included ideas raised by many groups in Reading and so we used them as the basis for framing discussions in the urban room. They were used to create a set of themed discussion weeks (figure 3) .

The sessions were developed to provide a range of methods of engagement and included discussions, presentations, workshops, drop in sessions. This offered community groups as many ways to engage as possible. To develop the programme for the urban room, the project had a community partnerships manager, Dr Nisa Unis. She had many meetings with community groups to understand how they would like to contribute. The programme was co-designed with these groups .

There were a variety of ways to engage: the research team worked with all groups to co-design a poster; there were opportunities for groups to have presentations on screens; to have in person discussion and debate; and it was a way to promote and engage others in the community in their work and events.

The urban room has shown that there is a great deal of local community interest and pride in their town. There were over 40 posters from local groups describing what they do - from organisations passionate about the environment, such as Ethical Reading, to community support groups. Others held discussions and contributed to the programme of community-focused events.

Figure 2: Opening ceremony of urban room at Reading attended by leaders of community groups and the mayor and councillors
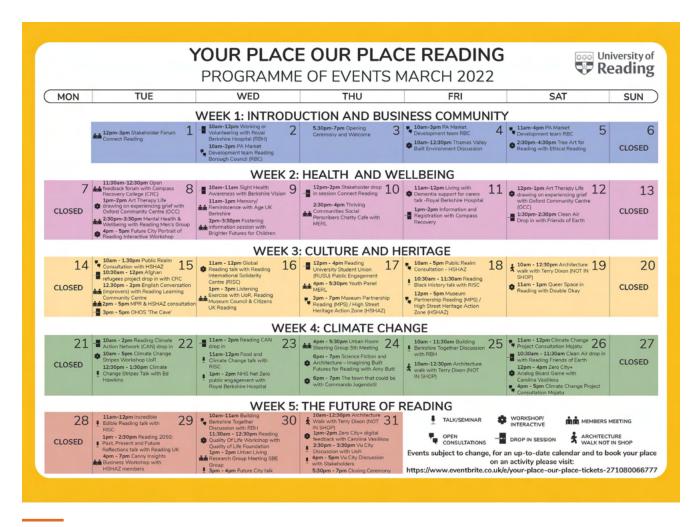
Figure 3: Programme of events in the Reading urban room March 2023

Figure 4: Week 1 - Royal Berkshire hospital drop in session to discuss new building

Figure 5: Week 2 - Art Therapy: Life drawing on experiencing grief with Oxford Community Centre

Figure 6: Week 3 - Portrait of Reading - interactive workshop by the group Future City on the Future of Reading station with students from the University of Reading

Figure 7: Week 4 - Climate change and Royal Berkshire hospital consultation

Figure 8: Week 5 - Reading Quality of Life Workshop with the Quality of Life Foundation

Figure 9: The Interactive board for visitors to make their comments about places they enjoy in Reading using post it notes

DESIGN OF THE SPACE
Designed by students from the School of Architecture at the University of Reading. Inspired by the pop-up Urban Rooms which have been earlier designed and installed around the campus.

SETTING UP A COMMUNITY SPACE
The Urban Room opened in March in Reading Broad Street Mall hosted several community groups and facilities that provide a local identity for the town

PROGRAMME OF EVENTS
Running over five weeks, the Urban Room hosted over 60 events which focused on five themes that are vital to the future of Reading.

MAPPING
Local community used both digital and physical maps to voice their opinion on various topics impacting their quality of life.

LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY
Conversation about what local communities value in their area

GATHERING DATA
Collecting surveys on their experience of consultation. Identifying areas important to the local community's health and wellbeing.
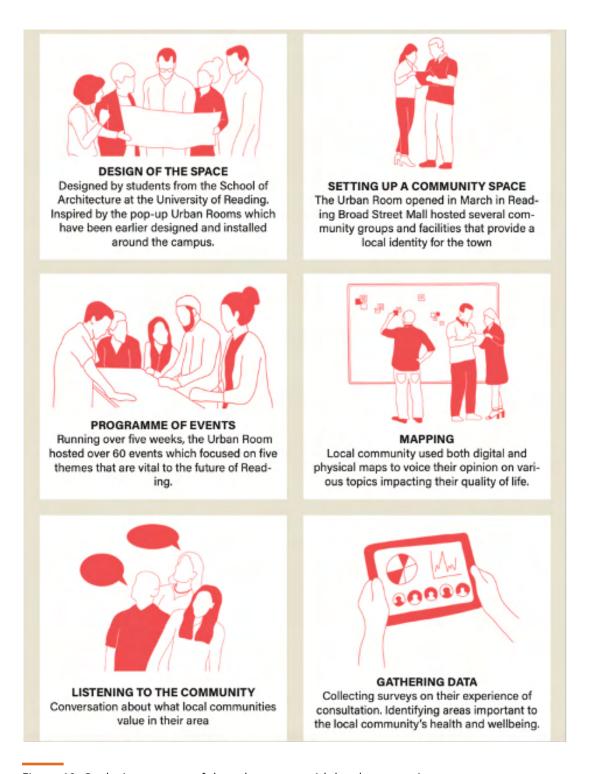
Figure 10: Co design process of the urban room with local community

Figure 11 Students from University of Reading worked with community groups to support workshops

2.2 Background to the urban room

It was important that the space for the urban room was in a part of Reading that was easily accessible to local communities and centrally located. The Broad Street Mall shopping centre, located in the centre of Reading, next to local bus services was an ideal location. It was open to everyone in a prominent part of the shopping centre. The space was called 'Your Place Our Place' in recognition of the intention to provide a shared environment for the local citizens of Reading.

Throughout March 2022, 61 events took place, for example, a session on sight health awareness run by Berkshire Vision and another on 'NHS net zero public engagement' with the Royal Berkshire Hospital, charity groups meeting to support local communities of a range of health issues from mental health to living sustainably in the town centre. These events were proposed by the local community groups, and this ensured that the communities came to the space and engaged actively. The groups involved came from a broad range - demographically, geographically and in terms of religion and general interest in local issues.

It is clear from the work the research team has been developing with the Quality of Life Foundation that local people are invested and interested in shaping their area. It is encouraging to see the number of community groups that want to be part of the discussion about their place, where they live and work. This type of community facility can offer a safe, inclusive space in our high streets for communities to describe who they are, increase participation and to be consulted about what they feel is important. A community space such as 'Your Place Our Place' provides a way to regenerate our sense of place in our communities, but also to bring people back to our high streets to reanimate our towns and cities.

The urban room at Reading was developed by building on the existing relationships between the local authority, the university, local business, and local communities. The steering group was set up before this research project as there was interest in a permanent space in Reading where discussions could be facilitated between local communities, business, local authority, and the University about potential for collaboration and synergy on shared topics such as a vision for Reading and sustainability issues that local people are concerned about including traffic and pollution. The urban room offered various opportunities to all of these groups to work together, to support one another, to disseminate information, share finance or business expertise and to provide ideas for the future of the town and region. The urban room can be an important factor to build on existing strong community links.

2.3 The findings of the urban room

The findings of the urban room were recorded to consider who attended and took part in the surveys. The data collected from the visitors is available online.

2.3.1 Observations from the data collected from the urban room

This data is very helpful to understand who visited the space, but also where there are the gaps in various groups who didn't or couldn't visit. There can be various reasons for this, such as a lack of awareness of the space, interest in connecting or visiting, or the relevance of the topic to a range of groups in and around Reading.

The gender split of attendees was almost equal, and the range of ages of those visiting was broad with the largest age group in the 35- 44 age group. Encouraging those from younger age groups to participate in consultation could be a possibility from this study.

In terms of those who had previously been part of any consultation exercise, 67 % of respondents mentioned that they had not been part of a consultation before. This suggests that this space was effective to bring more people in to be part of a consultation. The main reason that these respondents hadn't been part of a consultation was because they had never been asked (over 60%), highlighting the perception that there is a lack of effort to invite communities.

Those that did visit the space had heard about it from word of mouth (33 %) or from seeing the space in the shopping centre (31 %). This indicates the importance of a space being accessible and visible and in a central part of town and also person to person contact and recommendation to get involved.

The benefits of participating in community participation were identified as 'feeling part of a community' (67%) and 'enabling me to shape my area' (65%). As for the benefits of 'doing community consultation face to face', over 75% of participants appreciated the ability to ask for more information and have issues explained.

Identifying the benefits of doing community consultation online, 75% of participants identified the convenience and 39% the speed of engaging in the process. The reasons identified for wanting to come and participate in the face-to-face Quality of Life consultation: over 48% identified the reason as the staff who were part of the urban room process, who were welcoming and approachable. This indicates how important staff engagement is to ensure that people feel part of the process.

When asked about expressing opinions about developments in their area, respondents felt strongly (over 74%) that they should be allowed to express an opinion on planning in a part of town where they may not live.

Over 40% of respondents considered their neighbourhood to be somewhere where they can get to on foot or wheelchair in 20 minutes. Over 20% of respondents felt that they should have an opportunity to comment on planning proposals within 5 miles from their home but also within the broader confines of their county or city. This suggests that they are interested not just in their immediate neighbourhood but in decisions that affect places that surround the neighbourhood. Decisions made in neighbouring areas can impact on issues such as transport and facilities and communities appear to want to be part of this discussion.

In terms of access to the digital Commonplace platform in the urban room, 45% used the digital tablets assisted by staff members. Visitors appreciated the support they had from staff members to engage in this process. When asked about preferences to be consulted on the planning decisions, 51% preferred to have the option to do this either face to face or online. Thus, flexibility is an important consideration for consultation on planning to accommodate community groups and their various situations.

When asked if they thought that people needed to be given an opportunity to give opinions face to face in a community space with people on hand to help, 88% of respondents would like this opportunity. When asked about recommending digital community consultation to express opinions on planning consultation 68% agreed that they would recommend this process.

There were a few questions around data access and clarity. On the question about clarity of the information in the urban room, over 51% agreed it was clear, showing the importance of accessible information. Having someone on hand to explain information is a key point. There are various members of the community who may have difficulty accessing information online, they may not have a computer, smartphone, or experience of getting information online.

There was a point around the ease of finding places that people were looking for on the maps, 47% agreed it was very easy, this indicates that 53% of respondents needed more clarity about how to find information on the maps provided.

Overall, the surveys provide some useful data to inform future consultation processes for planning and how a physical space can complement the digital planning consultation approach. For many community groups having a physical environment with information and staff who can explain data, maps, and other information, to a variety of groups within the community would make this process more accessible. The possibility of a drop-in space in a very public high street environment ensures that those who may not be aware of planning or consultation taking place can participate as part of their everyday life and spread the word to others in their community groups to take part.

The feedback collected before, during and after the urban room helped the team come up with a range of findings on the impact that the urban room had on its participants. There were a set of interviews with participants after the urban room that showed that people felt welcome and accepted and this is a key factor in their continued participation. Participants have also described the new opportunities that opened up to them and how they met new people from their community that they wouldn't have met otherwise. There is a growing need for a permanent urban room in Reading, and the location of this is very important to the process.

The feedback themes included:

1. Feeling accepted

Participants described that they were listened to and encouraged by the staff and people hosting the events. They felt that people they talked to were interested in them and their ideas. They reported feeling included and an absence of judgement, which opened up the possibility for meaningful interactions with others. Additionally, feeling accepted puts people at ease and increases their confidence.

2. Feeling welcome

Being welcome is the first step for residents to walk into an urban room, knowing that they will not be judged and to feel safe. It's very important for people who walk past the open room. The big colourful posters at the front of the room drew visitors into the space. Staff explained to people walking by what the idea of the urban room was all about, and how they could participate. People could engage in events they wanted to participate in, depending on their interest and time. The welcome from the community partnerships manager and the rest of the team was always very positive.

3. Increase in confidence

Many participants described that one of the outcomes of participation in the urban room was an increase in confidence. They felt more confident to try new things and they are willing to engage in discussions and state their opinion as well as talk to others in the urban room. The participants' confidence increased due to feeling welcome and accepted. They were able to meet new people in a comfortable space and to be themselves. The interviews show that participation helps people to engage in new discussions and conversations.

4. Closing the loop

After being involved with the urban room participants explained that they would like to know the results of the consultations. They want to know what others value in the community as well as to keep in touch and learn the outcome of the project. Sharing that information, as one participant described, would allow for the next stage of conversation.

5. Sense of community

For some members of the community it is difficult to meet other people in the community and urban room is a space that provides residents with an opportunity to connect with new groups of people. The interviews indicate that there is a strong need to bring different groups of people together as Reading is a very diverse town.

6. New opportunities

Participation opened up new opportunities to meet new people and make connections. Participants built social networks which might be beneficial in the future. The organisations were able to connect with other groups which can lead to collaboration and improvement in the local environment and community.

7. Location

The location of the urban room was next to the Covid vaccination centre in a shopping centre, which some people felt stopped them from coming in. Some passers-by thought that the urban room was the vaccination centre. Others commented they found it hard to locate the room as there was not adequate signage in the shopping centre. Many visitors would have preferred if the urban room was in a more accessible high street location.

8. Interactive map

One of the most commonly recurring topics of discussion was the big physical map located in the back wall of the urban room. Many people wanted to participate in the community consultation on this map as the process was fun and engaging. Participants were able to see what others noted and place their own sticky notes on the wall. It was an interactive part of the exhibition. It opened up an opportunity for discussion between residents, by comparison to engaging with answers on the digital map or iPads, which people felt was not as accessible or engaging.

9. Permanent urban room

The interviews indicated the community strongly feels a permanent urban room space is needed in Reading. This space was open during office hours, and many felt there could have been more opportunity to engage with the space if it had extended hours and weekend opening times. To create a platform for community communication, people need a permanent, familiar space where they can access information and connect with organisations in the town. Other possibilities could be to consider pop-up spaces in other parts of the town, in the communities themselves where this would offer more accessible engagement with local issues.

2.4   Reflections on the urban room

There are many learnings from the experience of the urban room at Reading. Some of them are from the comments, conversations and direct engagements that were experienced with communities and between the communities of Reading. Other reflections can be made from the data that provide information that can help understand the range of groups that attended the urban room and whether this is representative of the population of Reading in general.

Some summary points to consider: the space facilitated connections with more than 90 local organisations/ businesses/ community groups between November 2021 – February 2022 to prepare for the pop-up space. There was a real appetite for this space and an enthusiasm from the groups to attend and get involved. The community partnership manager, who was employed several months before the project started on site, was essential in the process as she made the connection to these groups and engaged with them. She supported them to prepare events and posters for the space.

The advisory group was also essential to support the development of the space to ensure that as many communities as possible were contacted and that these groups reflected the key communities in Reading. The advisory group comprised members from the local authority and council, local business, local community and voluntary groups and the University.

The urban room was live for 23 days from 1st - 31st March 2022, including four Saturdays and four Thursday evenings. The extended opening times were very helpful for some community groups who needed flexibility if they were working or had family responsibilities. For this month-long event 55 local organisations, businesses and community groups agreed to be a partner, either by taking part in the exhibition through an informative poster and/or hosting a session such as a workshop, talk or walk.

During the 5-week period, 60 sessions took place on 5 different themes related to issues raised by Reading Borough Council in their local town planning review. At the start of the project, it was important to identify a theme that related to Reading. The local town planning review had identified some key themes which related to the local community, and these included: Mental Health and Wellbeing, Climate and Sustainability, Business Opportunities, and the Future of Reading. Once we had an outline of the themes and corresponding weeks, we then worked with various community groups to invite them to participate around these themes and develop the programme for the urban room. There was a lot of interest to engage in the topics of health and wellbeing and culture and heritage. This reflected the important topics for local people of Reading and their concerns and interests.

The urban room had interactions with more than 1200 people. The attendances in different sessions had a range of attendees between 3 people to 35 people.

Total contribution on the website: **504**	Pins on map: **400**	Participation surveys completed: **400**

Prior to the launch the team had conducted a series of conversations to understand the views that local community groups had about their engagement in the project. These are the questions that were asked:

1. What are the barriers to participate in consultation planning according to you?

2. Is your organisation planning to do any community event/talk/meeting where we can have presence to introduce our project further

3. Our research theme is Quality of Life in Reading; 1hat comes to your mind when you hear this? What does it mean to you?

4. What topics do you think are important to you and the members of your community in the context of their quality of life in Reading?

5. We will have a physical space in the heart of Reading where we will hold an exhibition and a series of talks, workshops, discussions. What do you think of these ideas for names: Y/our space, Your Space, Our Space, Place Team HQ, Urban Living room or do you have any suggestions – email us later.

6. In our event, we would like your participation and presence. What kind of activities would you like to do/host in this space? (if you have any)

7. What types of people aren't represented or who are those that never get in touch?

8. Is/are there other community/organisation you can suggest for us to contact?

9. What is your view of Reading as a place to live/work/play in for you and your community?

From the early the engagement with the local groups in the urban room, through to collecting feedback after the closure, the team identified the purpose of an urban room as a:

- Multi-use and flexible space which can be perceived differently for different groups

- Space where the community feels a sense of ownership, the community can just come in – without any reason, a space for them

- Space where you can discuss the neighbourhood's past, present and future

- Space where people can meet others from the neighbourhood, and other organisations of the neighbourhood

- Space that facilitates social cohesion

- Space to exhibit for information sharing and knowledge transfer

There has also been positive feedback on the idea of a 'neutral' community space that isn't aligned to any one organisation, in the heart of the town, such as the urban room, is much needed to provide the community in Reading with a place where they can meet and have shared conversations.

There are a set of common frames of themes that have emerged in discussion with local community, business and others who are interested in supporting community spaces. In interviews with these groups some key issues have come up. A key point was the importance that the community were part of a consultation space from the start of any process, so they felt a sense of ownership. It was suggested that engagement can actually improve outcomes for planning and actually can in many ways speed up the process if it's done properly.

Some comments were made that suggested the view was that the planning system, policy, and decision making around planning was much more a top-down approach and is now becoming more of a bottom up approach, encouraging communities to have influence. Another point discussed was the ways that different groups may engage in consultation. Younger age groups are more confident with digital methods and older groups appreciate conversation in person. That is not always the case, but generally. This needs to be considered when designing any community consultation process.

It is important, as many participants noted, to have mixed modes of engagements which can include physical maps and in-person debate and discussions as well as online surveys, digital mapping, and presentations. This would ensure that groups in the community with limited or no access to online information can take part and are not excluded.

Recommendations

From the experience of the urban room, it is clear that there are challenges locally to each community consultation. The issues that were experienced in the Reading urban room were related to support that various community groups needed to access information. Although all information is available on the internet, for some groups access to this information and knowing where this is and when it is available was considered a problem. There were many comments about how important they felt it was to have real people to engage with and ask questions during the process.

Many members of the groups that were consulted and invited to participate did mention that they had not previously been asked directly to take part in these processes and thus felt excluded. This direct invitation to take part in these processes should not be underestimated.

1. Ensure inclusive approaches to consultation: the idea of blended and mixed modes of engagement with local communities is important. To address the varying requirements of communities who may find engaging online difficult, analogue techniques such as physical maps, physical presentations and in-person debates and physical notices, posters or exhibitions are essential. For younger members of the community who prefer digital methods of engagement, online information, recorded events, or discussions are important. This also ensures that information can be seen at a later date if a 'live' event or presentation can't be attended.

2. All communities need a constant consultative space. The urban room should be a constant space for the community. Many consultations are one off events for a particular development or project. This requires building momentum for each consultation. If there is a space that is understood to be always available, i.e., a civic space that can be used as a point of reference and information for the community, then each new development will not need to start a process again. Investing time in creating a shared space that is owned and designed by the community for the community will make all these processes of engagement and consultation more effective for all. It is important that it is communicated that this is a place where trust and knowledge exchange can happen across a community. This will then become a 'known' place where consultation takes place.

3. Be creative to minimise consultation fatigue. Many communities feel that they are asked to take part and don't have a full picture of the context of the consultation. Communities need to understand the context of the consultation. The space needs to have a purpose beyond consultation. Planned events and activities through the year that relate to local themes such as culture and art or wellbeing within the community can complement consultation events.

4. Be careful about the language used to describe the activity of participation: the word 'consultation' can imply that the thinking has already been done and people are being asked to comment on something that has already been designed and planned. It is important that participation is also considered as a key aspect in this process for the planning.

5. Facilitate early engagement in the consultation process and enable participation throughout: One important aspect of development is that all communities should be consulted at key moments in the development process. This would include engagement at the start of the process, participation in the middle of the process, and consultation at the end of the process. This changing description is important so the community can feel they are involved in these processes and can participate in the outcome.

6. Dedicate funding to support community consultation: Consultation costs money so it should be funded. This can be through CIL or other developer contribution system.

7. Create a statutory requirement for structured, timely engagement: This would ensure that the information from the consultation effectively informs the development proposal.

8. Always feedback to the community about outcomes of their engagement: When communities contribute to a process, they should be informed about the outcome so they can understand how effective their contribution can be.

9. Share best practice of community consultation and engagement: This will ensure that community consultation and engagement improves, and the process is reflective.

10. Review existing processes and practices of consultation, involving local community representatives: Rather than this process being a vertical process as described by Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein 1969), it can be more horizontal as the process moves from participation to engagement and then consultation and then back to participation.

Proposed actions

1. A requirement for all community engagement for planning processes to facilitate mixed modes of consultation including digital and analogue, this will ensure that more members of the community can be involved in all types of consultation.

2. For community stakeholders to work together to create a platform to share best practice on consultation and engagement which could include community feedback and a network of expertise to deliver community consultation.

3. Local authorities to make provision for local communities to have access to a local permanent community space that can create a familiar environment to have meaningful discussion and conversation about issues that affect their locality. This space would facilitate early engagement and timely engagement in consultation processes . This space would have a purpose ' beyond' consultation – a civic space that is known and trusted by all community groups as a safe neutral space to participate.

Conclusion

The process of enhancing community consultation and working with the Quality of Life Foundation to develop a code of practice for community engagement in the built environment has been a journey of working with a set of diverse communities and groups to understand what matters to them where they live.

The issues that impact their daily lives are important to understand how we can work together to improve the quality of life of our local community groups. The comments that have come from our engagement with local communities clearly supports the idea of a space in their town that is always available to them for consultation, not just for one-off engagements, a space that is always in the public conscience as somewhere that information, debate and discussion about their towns and neighbourhood can take place in a safe and inclusive environment.

Part of the process of this research project has been to work with others from the 4 nations of the UK and learn from their experiences and approaches. Also, the partners of the project have brought a vast expertise to the process. There are several key toolkits, papers, blogs, and a code of practice that have been informed by the research.

As these are national reports for each nation, the respective policies associated with planning and consultation are changing to reflect the changing culture of community consultation and engagement and the perceptions of society to the idea of the community informing process and policy.

Community science is emerging as an important field that uses various technologies to inform community approaches and priorities. There are many data platforms that can be used effectively to support and inform community decisions around change both locally and internationally. It is also important to consider that co-production is an important aspect of community consultation. That co-production can be the process, exhibitions, and discussions.

An interesting observation from the RTPI in their response to the consultation on Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (July 2023), was that the different regimes across the UK for planning (which involves community consultation), 'could create confusion for industry and difficulties on cross-border plans and projects'. This comment offers an important observation, that the four nations have much to learn from each other and much to gain from working without borders and sharing good practice for community consultation.

We are after all one community, physical boundaries don't divide us, we have cultural differences that need to be respected, but there are also many values and cultural references that we have in common. The approaches to community consultation should be inclusive to all parts of the four nations and we should continue to share best practice and learn from one another. We should develop formal processes to share approaches and evolve our engagement with communities, which can have such a positive impact on outcomes of planning decisions.

A key message from all our collaborators is to engage communities early in the planning process and to provide a permanent place for community discussions, a place that the community can use as a reference point for information about the future of their towns and places, where they can make a difference.

Figure 12: Map of Reading with communities marking out places that they value

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