

Meaningful engagement is needed

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Imran Hashmi, senior researcher at New Local, provided key points from the think-tank's upcoming publication looking at the best ways to engage with the community and used the phrase that summed up our whole discussion – meaningful engagement.

Imran has explored the benefits of deep and meaningful engagement as opposed to more traditional forms where an authority already has a scheme in mind and takes this to stakeholders to find out what they like or dislike.

With meaningful engagement, an authority aims to build genuine trust with key stakeholders and tries to foster a collaborative approach to bringing ideas forward. Done well, this would ensure a community's needs and ideas are not overlooked, as can be the case with traditional engagement.

Engaging effectively requires the right skills and approach, including being open to gathering ideas, managing expectations and maintaining a conversation with stakeholders. It also involves overcoming challenges such as engaging minority communities.

Jessi believed this approach could address a current problem of a feeling of 'divorce' between a consultation and the reality of a regeneration scheme. Who has the conversations on what matters – are conversations happening at all?

Zo Hoida, regeneration partner at Browne Jacobson, pointed out that the timing of engagement is key, particularly where a key asset is concerned, to ensure it is early on in the process and not once the land-owning authority has already fixed on their preferred way forward.

However, Victoria felt there was a risk in not having any initial ideas to present to stakeholders to prompt thinking, ideas and discussion. Some people may struggle to engage because they won't know where to start. They may have no idea of what may be possible and could find the process overwhelming.

Julian agreed and also cautioned of the need to 'beware the void'. It can be challenging before any impressive plans are drawn up for stakeholders to understand the longer-term impact of ideas.

Building on the point of developing trust, Nalin explained the council took a back seat in some of the discussions for Sheffield projects and worked in partnership with the University of Sheffield to lead the engagement.

Bringing in a neutral partner brought many advantages to delivering the scheme. Many in the community had lost trust in the council so were much more willing to engage with the university. The involvement of an academic partner also brought a new perspective to the discussions.

Youth engagement

Thomas challenged the panel to consider youth engagement, given the types of projects being discussed can take 15 to 20 years to fully deliver and will therefore not benefit many of the stakeholders traditionally involved in consultations. Should youth voices be given more weight?

The panel reflected on the challenges in getting younger people to engage at all. Victoria highlighted commentary that suggested younger generations had less of a long-term view, which if true, may make it difficult to engage them in projects with long-term outcomes.

Morgan highlighted how the challenges young people face are systemic – they may rightly feel they are so far away from being able to buy a home that there's little point in engaging. Nalin felt that not seeking out the input of the younger generation would be a huge missed

opportunity.

Engagement platforms

The panel then considered whether traditional methods of engagement were holding back interaction with a group of people who are more responsive to digital and interactive platforms.

The reliance on conventional consultation methods overlooks the potential of social media and other digital tools that could significantly increase youth participation.

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