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Community – people with Common Unity - experiential, geographical, social, cultural, systemic.

What people and communities want

Great community engagement and consultation includes and empowers people and communities as equal stakeholders in decision-making processes about their place and how they will live in it.

A sense of ownership

As equal stakeholders people and communities will

- Share their knowledge, skills, confidences and expertise
- Take responsibility for decisions about their places and how they will live in them
- Create new opportunities for their community

Opportunities for community building

Engagement and consultation is part of a community building exercise from the outset

- Developing local leadership and connections between groups and organisations
- Supporting people to make connections in their place, meet their neighbours
- Making connections between people with common ideas, hopes and wishes

Meaningful participation

Equal stakeholders in designing and leading the process of engagement and consultation

- Transparent and honest discourse and communications from start to finish
- Well planned processes and reviews, and clear entry points for participation
- Respectful and meaningful ways to participate and a choice of methods

Mutual exchange

- Generative not extractive experiences
- Updates, feedback, accessible reports
- Opportunities for multiple intervention and shared power in decision making

Principles of best practice engagement and consultation

1. **Permission to try things out** - opportunities to explore, to get the best outputs:

- Take risks
- Plan in a review period
- Reflect honestly

2. **Embracing unknown unknowns** - a legitimate start point is to not know the questions you should be asking:

- Have a normal conversation, ask open questions
- Take on board things you hadn't considered to be of interest before
- What you didn't know at first might be the really important issues

3. **Plenty of time** - Engaging with people is a journey of mutual understanding and co-production. More time means you can be comfortable to let things flow and change:

- Plan big gaps between activities to accommodate communities' needs,
- Plan long lead in times to develop activities and let people know about them
- Plan around local calendars and holidays
- Be prepared to re-visit places, people, questions

4. **Many ways to participate** - The more ways people can participate the deeper and broader the information you gather will be:

- Digital and printed
- Online and face to face – groups and one to one
- Meetings should have lots of options for dates and times of day

5. **Accessible and inclusive communication** - All forms of communication formatted, and an inclusive welcome is clearly communicated:

- Digital materials should be accessible to all using accessibility software, and printed materials using accessible formatting
- Face to face meetings should be somewhere familiar to people, supported with a friendly welcome
- Venues need to be accessible to all, and access described on comms materials

6. **Choice of communication methods** – to capture things that people can't explain in writing, and giving the narrative power to participants:

- Listen to people chatting to you
- Give drawing and writing materials
- Side by side conversations are the best – while you do something together
- People might want to take photos or make a film about their experiences
- People love maps and photos of their place to comment on

7. **Fun is good** – give yourself and others permission to have fun and enjoy the process:

- The best conversations happen when people are happy and relaxed
- You need time, permission and resources to have fun
- Games and music are fun, food and refreshments are essential!

8. **Meeting people where they are** – you need to do the adapting. This means meeting people on their terms, in their place, where they feel confident and safe:

- Meet people's specific needs
- Meet people with others in their community
- Meet people in their place – and this can be a pub or café, or park

9. Be Generative – leave behind something good, meaningful and useful for the community

- More connected and cohesive communities
- Solutions to their issues
- Resources and skills
- A sense of generous, from food, fun and inclusivity

Working with the Community Sector

The best engagement is community-led, where the assets in a community are a starting point for the best practice. It might look like nothing is going on there, but there are *always* people leading on community projects and groups. Community leaders will:

- Know the issues that people face
- Already know some of the solutions and the resources needed to achieve them
- Be trusted by their community and will encourage more people to participate
- Help galvanise and organise support to run events and activities
- Know the communication channels used by their community
- Know about places that can be used for events and activities
- Give you more community contacts

To find Community Leaders start with easy to find contacts:

- Parish and town councils
- Place-based community sector organisations
- Housing and residents associations
- Neighbourhood wardens and police community support officers (pcsos)
- Interest groups
- Schools, youth clubs and identity groups

Keep it Local

Commissioning local groups or organisations to support community engagement and consultations will significantly enhance and extend outputs, over out of area consultants.

Benefits are significant and apply to all commissioning that prioritises communities:

- Investment in community capacity develops
 - Skills and resources that are generative not extractive
 - Confidences and knowledge for subsequent opportunities to build on
 - Creates capacity for long-term sustainable change
- Communities understand their community better than anyone else and can capitalise on
 - Existing connections and relationships
 - Existing activities and opportunities
 - Existing knowledge and instinct for what will work quickly and well
- Community leaders know what is needed to help people overcome barriers
 - Through their own lived experience
 - Through seeing the reality of the barriers for people
 - They can support people with the most complex barriers to participation

- A sense of community is the strongest driver for people to participate, around
 - Vested interests and purpose
 - Common experiences
 - Sharing good times, do things side by side
- The most effective engagement and consultation comes from
 - Existing and lasting relationships
 - Reliable and long-term engagement
 - Meeting people where they are, socially and emotionally
- Community leaders understand unseeable borders between places and people
 - Geographical barriers
 - Social barriers
 - Senses of inclusion and belonging
- Communities have local culture that affect their participation, such as
 - The spirit of a place and its characteristics
 - Preferences for places to meet
 - Communication channels and networks

Additionality

Community sector leaders and organisations can connect with resources and capacity:

- Community events – hitching a ride on existing community events taps in to goodwill and fun, meeting people where they are, finding who's missing and great conversations.
- Volunteers – community volunteers will lend a hand to benefit their community, and conduit information and opinions to and from their community.
- New initiatives – community sector organisations can create new initiatives and solutions to problems that are highlighted in the engagement and consultation process.
- Additional Funding – community organisations might have funding to support engagement and consultation, particularly for inclusion and community development.

Conversation with Community Leaders

The first stage of engagement begins with community leaders to frame the questions, the issues and work with you to get out to the wider community:

- Clarify the purpose of your process, what you need to find out and why
- Share understanding and knowledge of place, people and communities
- Find out what the issues and barriers for the community are, both in their daily lives and how this might impact your engagement process
- Find out who else you should be talking to, who should be in the room next time
- Listen, hear and review your thoughts about the community you are going to work with

Planning Consultation Events

Community leaders and local community organisations will know

- Where to hold an event or which existing activities to join in with
- When to hold an event to reach a good cross-section of the community
- Who to ask for equipment, activities, set up and provide refreshments

They will help to identify

- Activities that will encourage the community to come along and participate
- Barriers to participation for a particular community
- Local communication channels and networks to advertise the event

Bottom lines

- An inclusive and warm welcome
- Facilitation for people who need a bit of support to participate fully
- Food and refreshments
- Interactive and open questions

Review and Revisit

Open, honest and shared appraisal that will help meet the principles of best practice.

- Who was missing?
- Were our questions the right questions?
- What didn't we know that we now know is a thing?
- Should we consult again? In what form and who for?

Use connections in the community with people who are trusted and already working with others who had barriers to participation in your event, likely to be:

- Young people
- People on low incomes
- Older people
- Single parent families

Community Leaders are key to finding 'missing' people and connecting with them.

To connect with these groups it is critical to underpin plans with 2 of the principles:

- *Principle 8. Meet people where they are – you need to do the adapting.*
- *Principle 9. Be generative and generous, not extractive – leave behind something good, something meaningful and useful for the community*

Information

Not all information or data we collect is reliable and meaningful and therefore useful.

Achieving the best possible information happens when we apply 3 of the principles:

- *Principle 2. Embrace the Unknown Unknowns – a perfectly legitimate start point in collecting information is to not know the questions you should be asking*
- *Principle 5. Provide a range of ways to participate – The more ways people can participate the deeper and broader the information you gather will be.*
- *Principle 6. Give people a choice of tools to express their experiences – you will capture things that people can't explain in writing, and it gives the narrative power to participants*

We have false perceptions of how we receive reliable information, and questionnaires have become the most widely used tool solely because they make information comparable, centralised, and reusable. But, if we prescribe what we want to know before we begin a conversation we limit the information we will gather, and we are really only setting out to confirm what we have already thought of. Great information comes from

- Encouraging reflection to support meaningful responses, where people discuss issues and can learn from each other
- Embracing complex material or 'messy' information, so we are not limiting what we evaluate by the ease with which it can be evaluated,
- Having normal conversations, with open questions that are seeking truth and meaning
- Valuing information that is shared unprompted, even if it is some time after the event

It is harder to evaluate messy information, but everything must count and be counted. Alongside hard data, quotes, photos, drawings and stories are all legitimate information.

[Do we need more information?](#)

We must keep asking if the information we are collecting is in fact needed and what our purpose is for seeking it. What are we in fact learning? Can we simply trust our communities to make the decisions? Do we need to scrutinise what they tell us they need and wish for?

[Considering the use of questionnaires](#)

There is a huge amount of research available about the efficacy of questionnaires but these are our observations about using them to elicit information from people and communities where they perceive a direct impact on their lives, and have uncertainty about the future.

Unreliability

Participants response to the notion of a questionnaire will consciously or unconsciously bias the results, where they look for a 'right' answer, or want to please the people who might help them. There can be suspicion around the purpose of the questionnaire, and negative prior experiences of tests and surveys. Some people won't do the questionnaire, or share their truth. Those who participate are self-selecting.

The way in which questions and categories are framed, and the language used, can be unrelatable for participants, even if the subject is relevant. Participants who do not feel invested may ask what's in it for me, and why should I bother? They want to get through it, get it over and done with, and may not be thinking about each question but rather a pattern or generalised blanket response – ie positive, negative or neutral.

Un-inclusiveness

Questionnaires assume a degree of literacy and verbal reasoning, and the process of data analysis suggests that all participants will have had an equal and equitable chance of making a meaningful response. Questionnaires are a very specific communication tool, with a narrow spectrum for communication that cannot satisfy even a basic inclusion agenda.

The data we can collect with a questionnaire cannot reflect the complex and wide range of people and communities' experiences, where these are specific to them, and cannot fit in to a one size for all. Most importantly, a questionnaire makes assumptions about what is in fact possible or desirable for an individual, or of value to the individual themselves.

Impact on participants

Binary or even graded question options force people to make a choice between negative or positive where they might feel a number of simultaneous things are true. So the choice itself then creates a mind-set, and potentially a negative one, where otherwise the state of mind was more fluid or more positive.

Talking with others is a critical to understanding how we feel about things and how to describe that. Without these interactions the questionnaire entrenches existing notions and frustrates our need to discuss and debate and possibly change our minds.

Human nature override

The questionnaire as research methodology aims to collect information that can be standardised, as if the 'science' of data collection is applicable to complex human nature, where people can separate out feelings and thoughts into discrete packets of time, topic, cause and effect. Questionnaires ask people to commit to what they think or feel, when this might be different later that day and over a period of months.

Questionnaires assume specific skills and confidences to produce reliable data including memory, logic, sequential reasoning and thought processes, consistency in reflection and articulation of feelings where these require analysis of complex and changing environments and circumstances, and then decision-making skills to pick a response.

Lost opportunities

We are expected not to influence participants' responses to the questions, and so we leave them to it to do it on their own. This is a lost opportunity to chat about their experiences, ideas and solutions to issues. We are missing out on learning, finding those unknown unknowns, and building relationships and understanding.

The use of a questionnaire for summative data collection actively disempowers the participant where they feel 'done to' and going through the motions to satisfy someone else's purpose - they have no mechanism to claim ownership of the issues, or responsibility for finding solutions or for sharing ideas.

Community engagement and consultation is an opportunity to come together to solve problems and think about our places and communities, and to collect information we need. They are chances to share learning, develop skills, create new and consolidate existing relationships, grow our understanding and knowledge about where we live. We can have fun, get creative in the way we explore ideas, and experiment with ways of working together. We can be equal stakeholders, include everyone and find new innovative solutions we hadn't thought of. We can build community strength.

Times are urgent, lets slow down.

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