

How can we work together to shape our towns and cities for the better?

A cross-sector discussion on effective community engagement finds that digital technology is part of the solution, but behavioural and attitudinal change is needed at all levels.

Our towns and cities have historically been shaped by a small group of people – from landowners to planners to property developers – with local communities often finding themselves with little influence over the development process and public consultation coming too little and too late.



But things are changing fast. Aided by the rise of social media, issues like the climate crisis, Grenfell Tower fire and the Black Lives Matter campaign are empowering people to speak up and demand change like never before.



Within this context, a panel of industry experts met to explore the future of effective community engagement and stakeholder communications.



Webinar participants:

Akil Scafe-Smith, Resolve
Catherine Greig, make:good
Jessica Cargill-Thompson,
Public Practice
Lucas Wijntjes, SitePodium
Helen Santer, Build Studios
as Moderator

Helen Santer (HS) introduced the context for the discussion, taking place at a time when there are 'enormous challenges facing our towns and cities – from dying high streets, to housing shortages, to questions over how to fund our parks and open spaces'. The landscapes of our towns and cities are shaped by a small group of people and the process can sometimes feel opaque. Getting meaningful and timely engagement from communities is still a major obstacle **'but there is also a palpable sense of change in the air – with growing awareness of the issues and inequalities in society, people are speaking up and calling for change'**.

The first speaker was **Jessica Cargill-Thompson** (JCT), community engagement officer, writer, editor and researcher. Her work with Public Practice is about bridging the gap between public and planning. JCT recently finished the statutory consultation on the local plan for one London borough. She explained that Covid-19 lockdowns had 'fast-tracked local authorities towards digital engagement'. The methods chosen were based on reaching as many people as possible, from a wide range of demographic groups, in ways that residents were comfortable with, and capturing data in formats that officers needed: 'It felt a bit like we were thrown in at the deep end, but I think we're learning to swim now.'

'Digital tools offer loads of benefits and it's a case of using these tools in a considered way to ask the right questions and get responses in a format that's useful.'

Along with online forums and the ever-present Zoom, these tools mean it's a 'really exciting time in terms of digital community engagement'.

JCT also described how in lockdown, the Council still chose to distribute physical leaflets and place printed documents in community spaces, offering a highly visible and direct portal for a large cross-section of the population. 'This doesn't mean a digital-only future: our non-digital engagement, especially the stalls, was particularly valuable and we need those face-to-face conversations. Residents want them and they also want printed materials.'

Next, **Catherine Greig** (CG), founder of London-based architecture and design studio make:good shared her hands-on approach to engagement, describing a methodology which consists of **'listening, framing it, being hands on and making it fun. Engagement should be a joyful process so that people want to participate.'** She also described barriers to engagement such as time, timing and politics, explaining how shifting political scenarios mean that 'a great scheme can suddenly lose momentum

because politicians get cold feet.'

CG's presentation also shined a spotlight on programmes run by make:good designed to 'spark joy through people-filled workshops and activities.' Commenting on Covid, she said 'it has been a challenge as you're not having that proximity of conversation with communities.'

Offering an international perspective on the role of tech, **Lucas Wijntjes** (LW) described how community engagement app SitePodium **'was built on the core belief that technology can help to narrow the gap between the built environment and local communities. It allows people to follow along during construction projects that have traditionally been hidden by construction hoarding.'**

LW pointed out that, although community engagement and stakeholder communication is often outsourced in places like the UK and Australia, the commitments to local communities themselves cannot be outsourced. In the Netherlands, community engagement roles are typically embedded within companies' organisational structures and larger construction firms worldwide now understand that proper community engagement is part of the process, not just something forced upon them by a regulatory framework.

When it comes to engaging young people, **Akil Scafe-Smith** (AS), co-founder of Resolve and a researcher at the London School of Economics, adopts an equally hands-on approach. Despite the challenges of 'getting young people talking', there are great initiatives in London and around the UK. AS emphasised the importance of using existing civic groups to reach out to young people, affirming that 'being local practitioners is how we connect to local people'. Although the lockdowns forced a fresh approach towards digital engagement, AS noted that digital engagement can still be personal and that emotive responses to consultations are often the most effective. One such example was the narrative-led 'Tell a Friend' project, which asked young and old people in Croydon to record their memories of the local area online.

Discussing the impact of Covid, AS said **'On a macro scale, this period has really legitimised the argument that internet access is a right. We need to seriously consider providing internet access for everyone, which will considerably shift the landscape in terms of how we access different groups and reach people whose first language isn't English'**. Conversely, 'on a micro scale, we've also had to face up to our failures:

there's something about that personal intimacy of being on site that the digital landscape doesn't allow'.

HS then asked the panel whether 'high feelings on social media' led to actual engagement. CG responded that 'it comes back to the issue of timing and how accessible and transparent you are'. LW agreed that **'some clients speak about community engagement as a necessary evil, but I don't think that's true. I think people are genuinely concerned with what's happening where they live and we need to recognise the emotions at play'**. CG said 'my preference would be to talk about a collective community vision. If a developer says "here's my fixed vision, please buy into it", then it becomes impossible to create a really good relationship.' AS agreed, pointing out that people 'clock onto didactic approaches from developers sooner or later'.

Drawing on her work with business improvement districts, HS talked about the importance of local connections and open lines of communication. Based on her own experience, CG said community engagement doesn't have to take place around a specific or upcoming project: **'it's about showing up and being there, again and again. Once you've got that foundation of trust,**

you can do much more interesting things.'

On a question from HS on 'what successful community engagement actually looks like', CG pushed back on traditional framings of success, saying personal responses, connections and trust are as important as "I'm going to save you x-amount of money". 'If you work really well with people it feels different: you get joy out of it and a sense of reward because you're doing something purposeful.'

Wrapping up the panel discussion, HS asked **'how can we make people more aware of how to better engage with local communities? And, if we're looking to improve elements of that engagement, what should those be?'**

LW said 'Our clients are often inspired by each other's community engagement – they look at what others are posting on their timelines or hashtags. I'm happy that community engagement professionals can use our platform to learn from each other. Being able to inspire each other is a positive way forward'.

HS agreed that 'the "competitive neighbour syndrome" is interesting – if developers can be presented with examples of where it's been done brilliantly, then that in itself is a persuasive argument.'

CG feels that change comes less from showing and telling and more through lived experiences: this can create a powerful domino effect and help shift behaviour.

JCT made the case for resources: 'From a local authority perspective, planners often spend time with their heads down, focused on a plan -- and suddenly community engagement is tacked on. Wider change needs more creative thinking around the time, sorts of skills and costs involved.'

AS ended with **'This discussion has highlighted how much needs changing within community engagement. We need to start moving to models where there is far more equity in the decision-making process and build resilience in how we design, rather than trying to gather favour and establish a collective consensus on non-meaningful grounds'**.

HS thanked the panel for a valuable discussion, saying 'there's enough fuel here for four or five follow up events and much further conversation on how we change the mindset of developers and make the case for better engagement.'



Build Studios is a hub for the built environment. With events, education and co-working space, we aim to inspire people about the built environment through collaboration and learning.

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SitePodium is a community engagement app for managing communications around construction and infrastructure projects. Our digital platform is a cost-effective and efficient way to manage effective stakeholder engagement programmes.

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Meaningful is a communications agency specialising in the built environment. We work with our clients to build successful relationships with local communities and stakeholders.

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