

Engagement at Distance: How is COVID-19 changing the way councils engage with communities?

Programmes of community engagement and consultation have come to an abrupt halt due to the current public health crisis. The very core of what it means to engage meaningfully is at odds with the principles of social isolation and physical distancing which are vital in keeping citizens safe. The first Public Practice Discuss event was convened, remotely, to ask how councils are rethinking their engagement strategies? What are the new principles of participation? And what new tools and methods are starting to emerge?

The discussion was held between four Public Practice Associates, chaired by Jessica Cargill Thompson, Community Engagement Officer at Waltham Forest. Eleni Katrini, Lead Urban Designer described how Newham is adapting engagement strategies in an era of physical distancing. Arman Nouri, Regeneration Engagement Manager introduced how estate regeneration and associated programmes of engagement in Enfield are responding to lockdown. Jonathan Broderick spoke of how much of his role as Town Centres Investment Manager at Barnet has changed from physical town centre regeneration to business support; from growth and improvement to survival and recovery and the value in established and evolving networks in the borough.

Presentations were followed by a discussion, informed by participation from over 250 attendees. Notable themes arose around the practicality and implications of digital collaboration; the roles of authorities in a time of crisis; and how practice may change in future informed by the current and evolving experience in public engagement. What underpins best practice in engagement, for who, how, and why - at any time, unprecedented or not - flowed through all of this.

IS DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT ENOUGH?

Adoption of digital forms, apps and virtual platforms, the proliferation of online meetings, planning committees, seminars and discussions in the past few weeks can make it feel like the whole world has seamlessly adapted to ways of working considered beyond our reach at the beginning of the year. Expecting that all interested parties' engagement will suddenly transfer online is not going to apply across the board nor is the uptake of new tools. The using of existing platforms that people are already familiar with (e.g. Facebook) shouldn't be ignored.

It was reiterated a number of times that any digital engagement must be replicable off line. There are still a significant portion of the population who are digitally excluded. Though it may provide for wider participation, this shouldn't be at the expense of deeper forms of engagement. Capacity for multiple forms of engagement needs to be supported from all relevant institutions.

CAN WE USE THE SPACE AROUND US DIFFERENTLY?

While restricted in how we can use and interact in space together, can we find ways to adapt and use space more flexibly? Though physical distancing is vital, are there ways of bringing people and ideas together using time rather than space? People may not be gathering in community halls on a Tuesday afternoon, but passing along the same stretch of street on daily exercise there are opportunities to harness views during their daily activities over longer periods. Neighbourhood message boards or chalk on asphalt were shown as examples of engagement over time.

Many are familiar with examples from around the world streets being reclaimed from motor traffic and the use of urban space being markedly different to only a few weeks ago. Conceived as necessary solutions to enabling physical distancing, changes in the day to day use of places can engage and inspire communities of the possibilities of their places. There is evidently a keen interest in the range of solutions being applied by practitioners and shared examples of evolving and best practice.

IS NOW THE RIGHT TIME TO ENGAGE?

When there is so much uncertainty around the immediate, profound, impacts of Covid-19, there are serious questions around whether it is necessary or right to instigate new or pre-programmed outreach. For many whose views are being sought, the future of their high street, town centre or estate may not be the most pressing thing to put energy into. The long term importance of these issues is no less than it was two months ago, many argue more important, but it must be recognised that the bandwidth of individuals, groups and institutions is so limited that the real value of any additional tasks has to be taken into account.

What for some is the privilege of a pause in day to day activities can provide opportunities to reassess and prioritise what business as usual may look like in the future, across all functions of local government, including public participation. Where we do have the time and change in perspective we may be able to ask ourselves not only how practice may change, but what questions we are asking - from consultation questionnaires up to fundamental strategic guiding principles.

HOW CAN AUTHORITIES BUILD AND DIVERSIFY MEANINGFUL AND LASTING CONNECTIONS?

All speakers mentioned how local authorities are showing flexibility to 'rise to the challenge' across a much broader remit than just the built environment. How can local authorities tap into the explosion of mutual support groups that have sprung up in response to the pandemic? The ability of authorities to facilitate connections across, and support to communities is notable. Embedding these functions to optimise good practice and enhance resilience across departments needs to be better resourced to have the capacity to keep enabling these services.

While there are many positive stories of strengthened communities and networks there are two sides to the celebration of increased localism. The counterpoint to anecdotal appreciation of the value of local amenities and facilities is the surge in revenue for online retail and continued dominance of a small group of national retailers.

WHAT MIGHT THIS MEAN FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY?

A number of participants raised the question whether councils are concerned about legal challenges if they try to engage on contentious projects during this time. Barriers to engagement are not an excuse to step back from the democratic process of decision-making and placemaking. If anything, the rapid progress authorities are making to move their processes online - for example by establishing virtual planning committees - is helping to engage newer and larger audiences.

What can we take from this experience into better practice in the future? Networks that are forming and the very human need to collaborate that are emerging from this crisis may provide opportunities to enhance our methods of engagement in the future, building upon some extraordinary achievements across all fields.

CASE STUDIES SHARED (May 2020)

- Take A Part: [Non-Digital Isolation Engagement Google Doc](#)
- Bristol City Council / City Design Group: [Know Your Place](#)
- Locality: [Mapping Community Assets Online](#)
- Historic England: [Enrich The List](#)

NEXT STEPS

Through the work of Public Practice Associates and partners we want to keep this conversation going. Associates will be learning from this experience in real time and applying findings to their practice. If you know of initiatives or answers to the questions that came up in this discussion then please send them onto info@publicpractice.org.uk to keep strengthening knowledge and networks.

The summary of this event is authored by Ben Hockman.

The full recording of this event is available online.
You can watch it [here](#).

For more information, visit www.publicpractice.org.uk,
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