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Planning Aid **Wales**
Cymorth Cynllunio **Cymru**

SUMMARY REPORT

THE VALUE OF ENGAGEMENT IN PLANNING IN WALES

PREPARED BY

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With funding from Welsh Government

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Ethics & data protection

The privacy of individuals and the storage of personal data was considered at every stage of the research in the context of General Data Protection Regulations:

1. Personal data was gathered and stored separately to the responses to the questionnaire.
2. A full privacy statement was prepared and direct consent to store that data was sought.

In addition to the above, several participants expressed a desire to remain anonymous in the report, as such, individuals' names, positions and organisations have been kept anonymous and information provided by them presented in a non-attributable manner.



Ariennir gan
Lywodraeth Cymru
Funded by
Welsh Government

Introduction

This report summarises the main findings of research undertaken by Planning Aid Wales in 2021. The full version of the report is available at www.planningaidwales.org.uk/valueofengagement.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research sets out to explore and demonstrate the value of engagement in the working of planning in Wales, with the goal of proposing a path to embedding best-practice engagement in the Welsh planning system.

Who is it for?

This research is intended to be of use to Welsh Government in guiding future planning related activity, as well as to Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) and communities in Wales. It is hoped that the report will be used to increase awareness of the value of engagement and act as a catalyst to recognising meaningful engagement practice.

How will the findings be shared?

The findings of this research will be shared in two ways: 1) A set of recommendations that can inform the potential for future work by the Welsh Government about engagement in the planning system and 2) This resource is for Local Planning Authorities and other stakeholders, to both reinforce their understanding of the importance of engagement, and to demonstrate its value to local communities as well as communities of interest in Wales.

The Research Design

This exploratory research marries existing knowledge and practice, as embodied in academic and professional literature, with fieldwork based on established mixed methodology including a survey (95 respondents), focus group (21 informants) and one-to-one interviews (15 informants). Data gathered is analysed using themes identified through existing literature and an analysis of the relevant policy, to distill the principles shaping the recommendations.



About Planning Aid Wales

Planning Aid Wales promotes and facilitates meaningful community engagement in the planning process in Wales.

As the community engagement organisation in planning, our role is to build understanding of the planning system, support better engagement in local planning and encourage collaboration between communities, planning authorities and developers.

We are core funded by the Welsh Government and we also undertake projects and commissions on behalf of Welsh Government, Local Planning Authorities and Community and Town Councils.

For more information about our services, see www.planningaidwales.org.uk/ourservices

Acknowledgements

Planning Aid Wales wishes to record its thanks to all individuals, organisations and companies who participated in this research and many others who also gratefully gave their time and shared their insights with us whilst choosing not to be named:

Aberystwyth Town Council
Benham Architects Ltd.
Brecon Beacons National Park Authority
Cardiff County Council
Cardiff University
Ceredigion County Council
Design Commission for Wales
Grasshopper Communications Ltd.
Home Builder's Federation
Huw Griffiths Architects Ltd.
Isle of Anglesey County Council
Land Use Consultants Ltd.
Pembrokeshire County Council
Pembrokeshire National Park Authority

Place Studio Ltd.
Planning Officer's Society for Wales
Powys County Council
Rhos on Sea Town Council
Royal Society for Architects Wales
RTPI Cymru
Shirenewton Community Council
Studio Design Ltd.
Welsh Local Government Association
Wentlooge Community Council
Youth Parliament



CHAPTER 1

WHAT DOES THE LITERATURE SAY ABOUT ENGAGEMENT?

What is engagement?

Terms such as 'consultation', 'engagement' and 'involvement' abound in much of the literature and, in many cases, are used almost interchangeably.

The casual and apparently interchangeable use of all such terms is found most commonly in practical guidance and everyday practice usage by all parties – planning officers, councillors, developers and local people - in both plans and project proposals, but it is also apparent in much academic literature.



No widely agreed definitions – shared amongst all stakeholders – yet exist for any of the terms but a level of agreement has emerged in recent years amongst regular practitioners of engagement, both generally and in relation to aspects of planning.



Current approaches to engagement in planning can be traceable to the way planning systems have developed over time across the UK.



An emerging set of definitions suggests various components to practice exist as follows:

01

Informing

Letting people know that a plan or project is on its way, that key stages may have been reached or that a final version has been agreed.



02

Consulting

All key decisions are made by the project initiator but opportunities are provided for communities/stakeholders to comment at specific times.



03

Involving

Where communities/stakeholders have a genuine opportunity to discuss and develop ideas.



04

Engaging

Plans/projects, or aspects of them, are developed almost in partnership with communities/stakeholders, with full opportunities for anybody to challenge, develop, suggest, evaluate and ideally agree the outcomes.

Who
?

A 'Community of place' refers to those living within a small, loosely defined geographical area. A 'Community of interest' can be 'any group of individuals who share interests and 'Stakeholder' includes any other individual or associations of individuals with a 'stake' in a plan or project.



WHAT DOES THE LITERATURE SAY ABOUT ENGAGEMENT?

Where is the value in engagement?

Academic literature gives indications of what the value of engagement might be; what is understood as 'value' varies by sector according to the individuals and groups involved and the local engagement culture that has developed over time in specific contexts:

One feature all actors' views seem to align to is around what makes engagement meaningful for them: a positive feature that 'adds value' to either planning and development processes, or the physical outputs thereof, or both.



£20,000 – £100,000 projects

A typical pre-application consultation was found to cost around 0.3% of the gross development value on residential applications (Scotland). Such specific monetary evaluation is rare.

0.3%
GDV

RPTI's *Measuring What Matters* report sets out a framework for monitoring and evaluating the outputs and impacts of projects in terms of wider social, economic and environmental value.



What principles encourage positive outcomes in engagement?



Start early

Engagement should start as early as possible in the planning process (well before development management).



Build trust

Building trust between stakeholders is essential and should be established through openness and honesty.



Clear process

A clear process should be established at the outset, which is agreed between stakeholders, but designed and managed with demonstrable independence.



Manage expectations

The scope of the engagement should be established at the outset to manage expectations of outcomes.



Mutual exchange

There should be a mutual exchange of knowledge and learning between stakeholders.



Variety of methods

A variety of engagement methods should be considered, appropriate to the specific project and engaged groups and people, with a view to maximising inclusion.



Common base

A common base of information accessible to all stakeholders should be established.



Clear feedback

Clear feedback to communities and stakeholders should be an ongoing process.



Meaningful evaluation

The process should be recorded and reported, in a way that facilitates transparency, meaningful evaluation and that enables tracing of engagement from visioning through to plan making, development management and masterplanning.

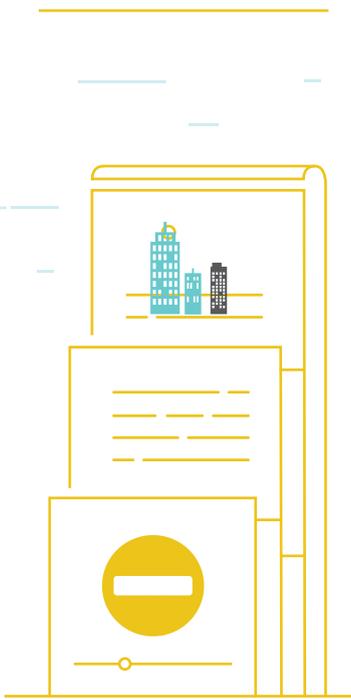


WHAT DOES THE LITERATURE SAY ABOUT ENGAGEMENT?

What are the barriers to effective engagement?

The causes of a lack of trust, negative attitudes and low participation in the planning system can be summarised as:

- A lack of **public awareness** around how they can get involved with the planning process, particularly within more socially disadvantaged communities .
- **Public apathy** resulting from a perception that ‘consultation did not lead to any real tangible change for the better’, which can be perpetuated by no or inadequate feedback.
- A **negative public bias** in the perception of what statutory engagement is for, particularly for specific planning applications where the public’s ability to object isn’t accompanied by the ability to propose alternatives.
- There is a **technical process bias** in the perceptions of engagement at the expense of political and democratic opportunity.
- Successive reforms have fragmented the planning process in terms of time, scale and issue (in England). This makes for **disjointed, narrow and limited engagement practice**, often focusing on the local scale. The Welsh context is explored in this report.
- **Negative elected member perception** can leave councillors feeling intimidated by engagement in respect to specific decisions who can then limit their involvement in such activities. Members are described as ‘often invisible and lacking leadership’, particularly when issues are controversial.
- Too many terms within the realm of **engagement would benefit from further clarification** and are used and misused interchangeably. This could cause a lack of focus in understanding and clarity in implementation right from the start and creates opportunity for misunderstanding and misinterpretation – which in turn might prepare the path to a lack of trust.





CONCLUSION

What does the literature say about engagement?

Current academic and professional literature analysed in our research suggests:

01

There is no agreed definition of what engagement is, however there is an emerging agreement amongst engagement practitioners that it is a practice aimed at including – to various degrees – citizens and communities in decision making related to land and its uses that entails various components (informing, consulting, involving, engaging) to be adopted in various ways at different stages of the planning and development process. This practice is based on accepted principles, is structured around a set of accepted tools and approaches, and its effective adoption is currently limited by specific barriers.

02

There are **six** relevant themes from which engagement ought to be looked at and evaluated:

- **Clarity & accessibility**
- **Engagement as a continuous process**
- **Engagement as both a technical and a political moment**
- **Transparency in decision-making & accountability of outcomes**
- **Certainty of process**
- **Costs & equity**

03

Engagement in planning is valued. Despite different actors valuing it for different reasons, most actors appreciate **meaningful engagement** when the engagement process is seen to add (rather than detract) value to either planning and development processes, or outcomes, or both.

04

Developing a consistent approach to engagement as a feature that adds value to planning processes might provide an opportunity for Wales to strengthen its Place-making agenda;



“

Rebuilding trust in planning among all the sectors is a vital objective for future planning reform, with multiple benefits for everyone.

- Town & Country Planning Association, 2018

Research design & results

This chapter summarises the selected approach and key findings of the primary research undertaken by Planning Aid Wales during the project. Conclusions from this section will help shape data analysis and inform conclusions and viable short-, medium- and long-term recommendations. The research was designed around three key questions, i). What is engagement?, ii). Value of what for whom? and iii). How to make meaningful engagement happen? These questions helped guide both the desk-based literature and policy review (presented in the previous chapter) and the subsequent fieldwork phases. Fieldwork was organised into two successive phases: Phase 1 subsumes a scoping questionnaire and focus group meetings of selected participants; Phase 2 semi structured interviews and case study research.

Survey results

95 informants commenced the survey and 84 completed the survey in full. The distribution of informants by sector is shown in Chart 1. The higher proportion of Community Council informants is attributed to the fact that Community Councils are Planning Aid Wales’ primary audience. Low response rates represent a strong finding in itself and is potentially an indicator of the lower priority placed on engagement, particularly by some stakeholders groups. Despite the paucity in numbers, the stronger trends reported provide a valid initial insight in the topic. There was wide agreement on all of the principles suggested as important to support effective engagement.

Driving target audiences to complete the survey proved challenging; only 6.7% of those invited completed the survey. Some sectors were more resistant to participating, notably Developers / consultants, some of whom stated that they had insufficient time to participate.



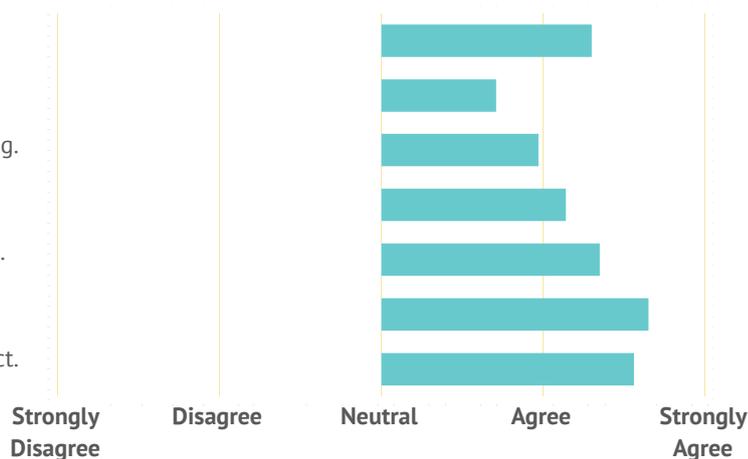


SURVEY RESULTS

Benefits / advantages of good engagement

Good engagement can...

- Introduce community ideas, concerns, and aspirations.
- Introduce community knowledge and information.
- Raise community awareness and understanding of planning.
- Help to secure community agreement on a plan or project.
- Save time overall from 'day 1' to completed plan or project.
- Save resources overall from 'day1' for all parties.
- Improve the quality/deliverability of the end plan or project.



“ The earlier the engagement the better (7)

It fosters community ownership / responsibility and reduces fear of development (5)

Opportunity to identify wider stakeholder views beyond current issue (3)

Measure current priorities, fears and preferences to help tailor provision (3)

People need to understand the importance of early LDP / strategy engagement (3)



The results illustrate broad agreement on the benefits of engagement across all sectors, if less so on cost (resources) and time.

Agreement was strongest across stakeholders on the idea that engagement benefits the development process by introducing community knowledge & information, as well as aspirations, ideas and concerns.

A summary of other comments on the benefits of engagement as fed back by participants is provided opposite (ranked by number of similar responses).

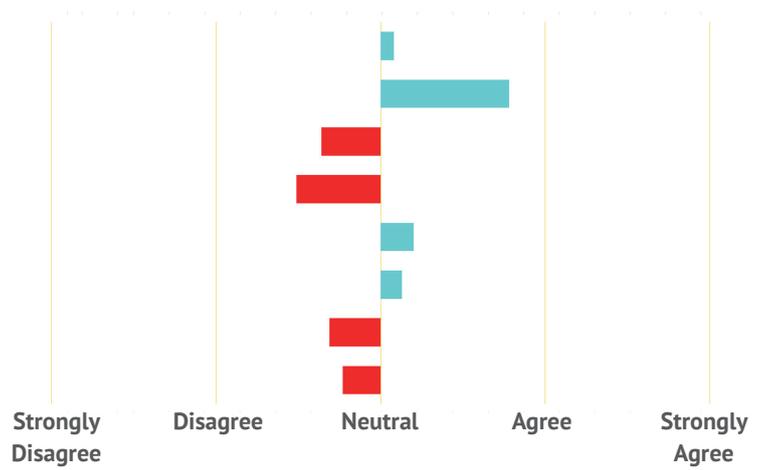


SURVEY RESULTS

The disadvantages / drawbacks of engagement

Engagement can be negative because...

- Few people understand enough to contribute usefully.
- Community views should not outweigh broader aspirations.
- Comments often have little to do with planning issues.
- Responses are dominated by a few individuals and groups.
- Community views are always parochial, or even selfish.
- Securing agreement from a range of people is impossible.
- People are tired of responding without feedback.
- People do not bother responding.



“ There is a silent majority who do not engage (4)

Engaging with people offline (somehow), particularly during the pandemic is essential (4)

Terminology used could be clearer (3)

Cost and time factors (3)

Community do not know how to engage fully; planning teams should help (2)



Generally, negative statements showed the lowest level of agreement and 50% of the statements were rejected across all groups.

Agreement on the positives outweigh the negatives of engagement; the strongest agreement was that there is fatigue with responding to multiple consultations that do not seem to link, do not lead to change, nor provide feedback to participants.

A summary of other comments on the disadvantages of engagement as fed back by participants is provided opposite (ranked by number of similar responses).

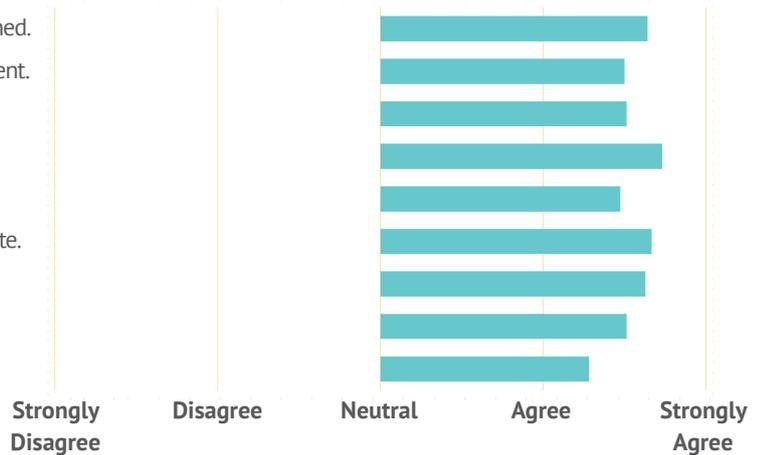


SURVEY RESULTS

Improving engagement practice

All respondent's average scores...

- Start early, on 'day 1'; not when a plan is drafted, or a project is designed.
- Make clear what can and cannot be changed as a result of engagement.
- Share information that is understandable to non-experts.
- Making sure to contact and engage all key groups and individuals.
- Ensuring the 'usual suspects' do not dominate the process.
- Use a range of methods and times that enable everybody to contribute.
- Offer more than just one or two opportunities to contribute.
- Offer genuine options (or explain why no others are possible).
- Produce and share a final report to show contributions were used.



“ **Using a mixture of techniques, online and offline. Timings of events to include working and non-working people (11).**

Clear easy to understand final report (3).

Adapt to pandemic but keep it meaningful (3).

Be clear about what is being delivered and why, not to give false promises (3).

Bring more balance by engaging the hard to reach (2). ”

The strongest agreement amongst all groups were on statements about opportunities to improve practice. The strongest agreed suggestions were to use a (broader) range of methods, to involve all possible groups and to produce and share a final report to show how contributions were used.

Across the responses, community groups felt more strongly in agreement with these principles than developers & consultants, except for one. Developers and consultants felt more strongly that engagement should ensure that the usual suspects do not dominate the process, and the community groups were also in agreement with this.

A summary of other other suggested improvements as fed back by participants is provided opposite (ranked by number of similar responses).



FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Focus Group – ‘Making it happen’

Focus group data has been gathered via one two-hours online meeting attended by 21 participants, all of whom had completed the questionnaire. The participants agreed on the six main areas of future action described below. It was agreed that a key step forward to develop meaningful engagement would be to (a) en-sure real consistency between them all in terms of benefits, principles, methods etc. and (b) make it clear that everything has multi-sector support so as to foster a process genuinely aimed at adding value for all.



Guidance

Further guidance on all aspects of engagement would be useful. A Wales-focused ‘10 Commitments’-style report would be beneficial and different groups/sectors will need more sector-specific guidance.



Training

People generally agreed about the importance of training (on engagement) for elected members and all sectors present.



Case studies

The audience were unanimous that developing and widely sharing examples of good engagement practice, ideally from Wales, was essential.



Support service

It was agreed that a support service to provide advice and guidance on engagement matters would be beneficial.



Awards

It was suggested that a Wales-wide awards scheme for good engagement would be very valuable, both in its own right and in order to flush out good case studies.



Leadership

There was agreement that some form of campaign to provide overall leadership and championing about more and better engagement is needed.



INTERVIEWS

Interview results & case study development

In order to further the understanding of the issues explored in the survey and discussed in focus groups, a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with 15 informants from a range of different sectors and having different perspectives on engagement. Sample summaries of initial findings are presented below; all were considered in the analysis that follows and some were developed further and presented as case studies where appropriate in the next chapter.

Interviewee(s)	Key issues discussed
Local Planning Authority	Conflict in various guises between local desires and strategic development goals. Consultation can become 'box ticking'. Place Plans, resources and implementation into strategic development.
Architect	Example of thorough early-stage approach to engagement on a community building. Local resident key in championing the project to community networks to drive early engagement and built a level of trust with LPA. Finance and support uncommon to enable this level of engagement.
Town Council	Development of a Place Plan. Challenges in development but enormous benefits already identified, not least leveraging inwards investment on the strength of evidence gathered during preparation.
Local Planning Authority	Challenges of delivering meaningful engagement – low participation in early engagement events where there is no controversial issue raised. Difficulty engaging during COVID-19, challenges in identifying appropriate online engagement tools. Low interest in Place Plan development in areas with no community councils.
Planning Consultant(s)	Consultants' perspective on a green infrastructure project, working with council and national park. Lots of stakeholders/involved parties with misaligned expectations. Aim of project not made fully clear. See benefits of online engagement tools, but aware that other methods have a key place.
Local Planning Authority	Resourcing appointment of a dedicated Community Development & Place Plan Officer, one of the only such named officers in Wales. Discussions around advantages and challenges of engagement and consequent benefits of having such a role in the planning team.
Community Council	Pre-App public Consultation event – PAC process not successful in creating positive local engagement, despite consultation event perceived by developer as having gone well.

Interrogating current practice (analysis & case studies)

This chapter identifies and organises all data gathered in the literature review, policy review and fieldwork to identify common coded issues to guide progress in improving engagement and exemplify relationships between them. These codes are then linked to the relevant themes emerged from chapter 1.

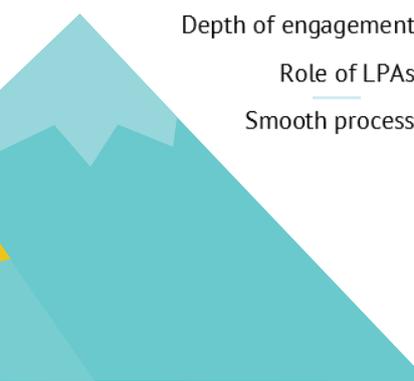
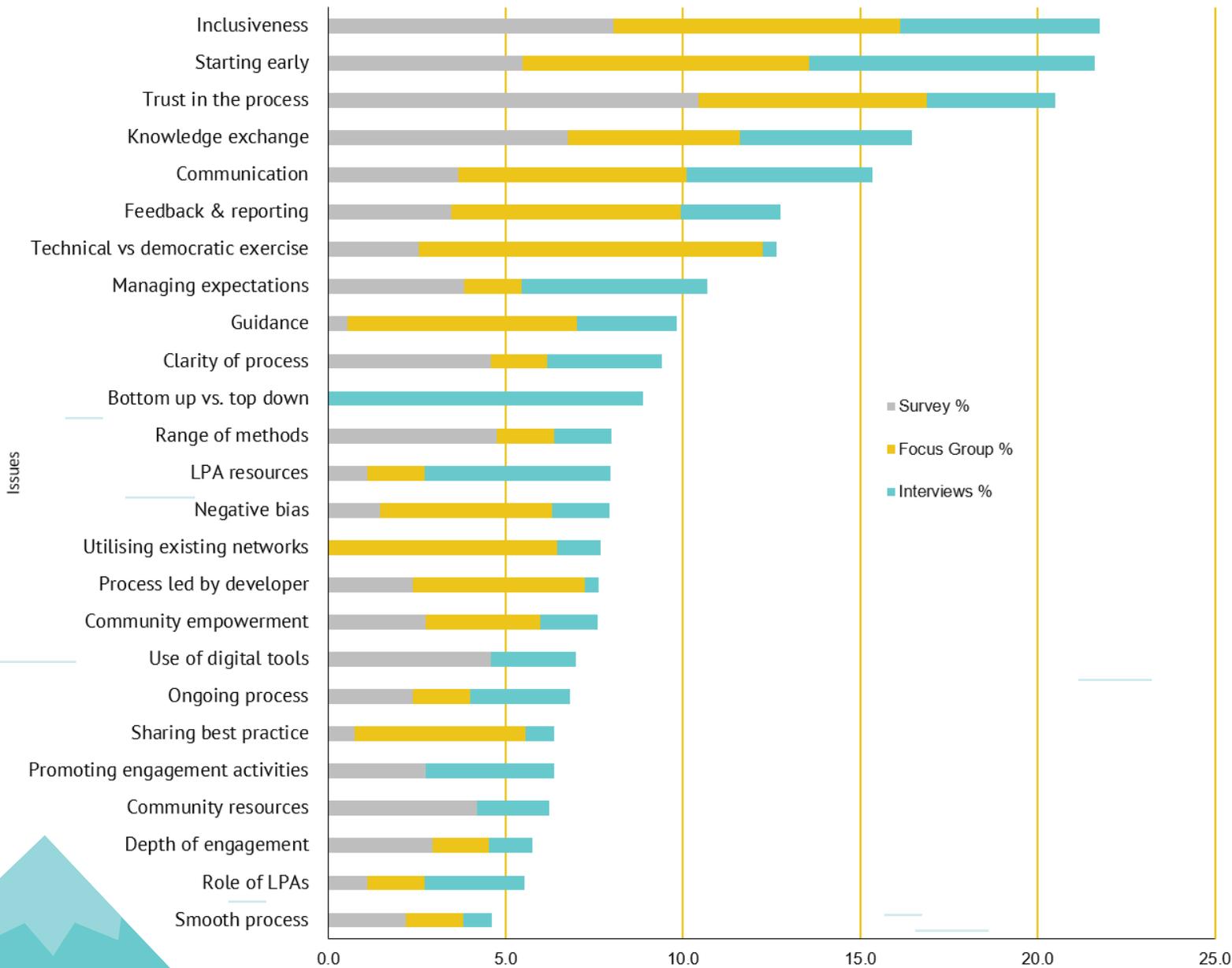


Issues that occurred most often across all activities: a need for inclusiveness, to start early, build trust in the process and exchange of knowledge.



Key issues from the fieldwork

A series of 43 codes (or issues) were identified based on data gathered through all methods employed in the fieldwork and the number of times each key issue was brought up was recorded. These issues were then linked to where they originated from within the project, namely questionnaire, focus group and interview. A sample of the number of occurrences of these issues across the sources is illustrated below.



Analysis & case studies

The remainder of this chapter organises and discusses the findings of the codes (issues) under the themes identified from the literature review.

THEME 1

CLARITY OF PROCESS

1.1

Be clear about what engagement actually is.

Terminology in law, policy and practice in Wales could be clearer and this is reflected in informants' views.

1.2

Clearer guidance on engagement.

Existing policy and guidance on engagement in planning is fragmented and vulnerable to assumptions in respect to engagement.

1.3

Use appropriate engagement methods appropriately.

Varying engagement approaches to fit the context, type of project, audience and planning/development stage is essential. Engagement exercises should be accessible and avoid use of planning-specific language for increased accessibility. More support to LPAs is needed.

Place Planning in Aberystwyth

When Ceredigion County Council's Economic & Regeneration Service took the initiative to follow Welsh Government ambitions to adopt a new approach to community planning in Wales and start the Place Plan process across the County – Aberystwyth Town Council, along with 5 other Towns were invited to produce their own Place Plans. At the time of the interview, Ceredigion County Council were still working with towns across the County to develop place plans for the six main towns and their surrounding communities. Progress has been delayed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic but the process of finalising these plans has resumed.

Aims of the project

Aberystwyth Town council were encouraged to engage with their local community to develop a vision and to produce a Place Plan – but they also wanted to undertake wider engagement to get a picture of what people wanted in the town and how they wanted it to look in the future.

How did they do it?

The starting point for the Town Council was organising an initial Stakeholder meeting in 2018 which was able to draw out interested parties to set up a Working Group. The working group comprised of several interested parties including adjoining community councils, business interests and the university. A workshop followed in early 2019, which attracted over 40 people from all sectors of the town. Following the workshop event, questionnaires were distributed throughout the town to gauge local views and opinions.

What is of Value?

The project has led to several interesting projects being identified. The Place Plan concept has allowed local communities to get involved in a “planning” project whilst not homing in on planning related issues from the outset. The “open” conversation style of engagement attracted more people to get involved and has “allowed open discussion on a range of topic areas and themes” (Aberystwyth Working Group).

Identifying Community Champions to lead the engagement has been invaluable, and Alain Haird of Ceredigion County Council noted that Towns “that had a champion seemed to achieve greater results from their engagement”. The County Council has confirmed that the results of the engagement programme across Ceredigion has been invaluable for other programmes such as the Public Service Board and has been used internally by the Council to inform the recently published Economic Strategy, provided evidence for a Levelling Up Fund application and helped secure a Greener Infrastructure Grant for Lampeter, enabling a project identified in the Place Plan to come forward.

Tips to pass on

- Set up a Steering Group early in the process – identify Town Champions.
- Public engagement needs to be a “conversation” – use innovative techniques to encourage the community to get involved, such as story studios.
- A facilitator with experience of engagement and Planning is invaluable to take projects forward.
- LPA Policy Officers to have some involvement at the outset.
- Experts with planning expertise to get involved.
- Place Plan training should encompass all at the outset.
- Focus on a particular geographical area.
- Place Plans can also contribute to other strategic approaches.

More information

Aberystwyth Town Council - <https://www.aberystwyth.gov.uk/en/>

Ceredigion Economy & Regeneration Service - <https://www.ceredigion.gov.uk/>, placeplans@ceredigion.gov.uk

Cynnal Y Cardi LEADER Project - <https://www.cynnalycardi.org.uk/leader/>





“Our project is used as model by other aspiring communities wanting to deliver similar facility.”

(Community Council)

1.4

Advertise clearly, promote widely and encourage effectively.

In order to overcome low interest and reach the silent majority, using lay language and methods nearer to people’s lives could improve the reach of advertisement. Innovative use of visuals could better promote events.

1.5

Share best practice and guidance.

The value of good engagement practice should be celebrated and shared systematically to help build understanding.

THEME 2

ENGAGEMENT AS A CONTINUOUS PROCESS

2.1

Start early.

The earlier meaningful engagement takes place in the planning process, and the more it connects to Place planning, the better the likely outcomes.

2.2

Make engagement a joined-up, ongoing process.

Engagement is more meaningful when seen as a continuous exercise subsuming a series of linked stepping stones (rather than separate one-time consultation exercises).





“By inviting a range of stakeholders with various specialities and local knowledge, a vast range of issues, opportunities and examples was identified more quickly and with greater detail than could have been achieved by individuals from our project team conducting site visits and online research.”

(Planning Consultant)

2.3

Create ongoing conversations.

The aim of engagement activities should not be to reach consensus on every issue, but to expose people to the views of others and create common understanding that adds value to specific projects/ planning outcomes as well as planning processes and local trust in the planning system and public administration.

2.4

Enable communities.

The opportunity to meaningfully engage with development empowers people to have an impact on their built environment and will lead to better placemaking in time. In order to link planning with the making of better places for people, Place plans are key. Many community councils and community groups need funding, skills and resources to facilitate engagement that provides added value. Such investments pay dividends.

2.5

Connect specialist and local knowledge.

Reciprocal exchange of knowledge through engagement benefits all stakeholders and adds value to planning processes and planning outcomes.



Policy Engagement in Conwy

Conwy County Borough Council's planning policy team are committed to delivering the best forms of community engagement they can within the context of limited resources and time. Conwy also have a permanent Strategic Engagement and Place Plan Officer as a member of their planning policy team. This officer is a non-planner from a community development background and appears to be the only dedicated Place Plan officer in Wales.

How is engagement approached in Conwy & where is the value?

In many respects, Conwy's approaches to community engagement on planning matters is not radically different from other planning authorities; statutory consultation notices are issued, documents are put on public display and in addition to minimum requirements, drop-in sessions are provided and topic-specific meetings are held with all types of stakeholders, including with those from hard-to-reach groups. However, there are some nuances in approach and some underlying principles that have helped Conwy generate wider interest:

- Engage as early as possible. When engaging early, be clear about what could (and cannot) be achieved, but also try to visualise potential options to capture people's imaginations.
- Prioritising delivery of engagement activities in places communities actually used (such as community centres) rather than traditional 'town hall' style venues had proved successful.
- Use social media 'brokers'. Rather than relying exclusively on the local authority's own social media pages, community councils / groups were invited to share posts about the LDP on local community noticeboards and 'gossip'-style pages; this allowed a broader reach to be achieved.
- Communicate clearly and concisely in an engaging way.
- Extend minimum consultation periods and give people time to come back.

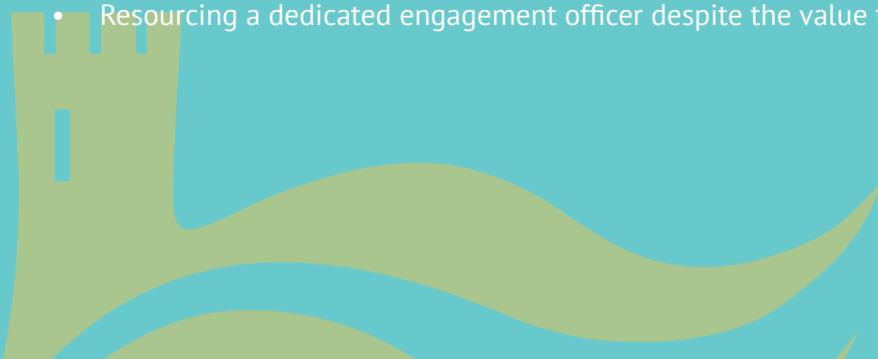
Crucially, having a dedicated community engagement officer in-house within the policy team is considered vital to provide and bridge local knowledge, maintain continuity across different engagement exercises, provide meaningful feedback on planning issues and build and maintain trust with communities.

How is the community engagement role resourced?

It is important to emphasise that the role was incorporated into the planning policy team after internal restructuring. The planning policy team was moved into a different directorate that had community engagement officers. Later, the policy team was returned to the planning directorate and the role was retained (with some persuasion), as the value of the role was recognised. Subsequently, the community engagement team was disbanded and retaining the role can be challenging. Ultimately, the policy team can evidence the value of the officer in question, but it was emphasised that the designing and procuring a budget for a new role might have been much more difficult.

What are the challenges / lessons learned?

- Engaging for an appropriate length of time whilst striving to meet LDP production timeframes.
- Going beyond the 'bare minimum' at the earliest stages; it is more difficult to engage people 'with a blank sheet of paper', but visualisation helps.
- Engaging at the right level of technical detail; communities can be put off by overly complex interventions, but at the same time need a meaningful level of detail in order to participate.
- Ensuring communication graphics and videos are engaging without leaving the audience feeling patronised; short summaries can yield better results over 'easy read' style documents.
- Ensuring emphasis on strategic matters rather than grass-roots community development work.
- Resourcing a dedicated engagement officer despite the value the role brings.





THEME 3

ENGAGEMENT AS A TECHNICAL AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY

“Our Place Plan has been developed with the community and the LPA, in accordance with policy and brought a wide range of benefits”

(Community Council)

3.1

Enable elected members.

Elected members should be encouraged and supported to play a more active role in engagement in planning matters.

3.2

Taking stock and developing practice around Place plans.

Place Plans may bridge between Place making and overarching plans and policies.

3.3

Avoid tick-box exercises.

Opportunity to add explanatory notes, checklists and guidance as to what makes engagement meaningful via presentation of the added value it provides to the process.

3.4

Overcome negative bias.

Negative bias, hindering meaningful engagement, emerge from perceptions held from all stakeholders on each other.



Enabling the community in Grangetown

When a resident of Grangetown asks “where can you get a coffee in the park” in 2012 – nobody could foresee the exciting project that would follow.

Aims of the project

Grange Pavilion is a partnership project between residents’ group Grange Pavilion Project, Grangetown Community Action, Cardiff University and Cardiff Council to redevelop a previously vacant bowls pavilion into a top-quality community facility.

How did they do it?

Engagement has been at the heart of this project from the outset. Exploring what the community wanted to be included in the original brief and how they wanted spaces arranged led to a number of engagement techniques being introduced such as mind maps, modelling and testing projects within the existing building. Dan Benham Architects engaged closely with the Grangetown community to get their views on the design – the designers needed to know how the building would work for them. Early in the process positive dialogue was set up with Cardiff Council Planners. The vision was explained and being sited within a listed park – sensitive design was paramount. Communication between the LPA and designers led to trust and a way forward through the planning process.

What is of Value?

Between June 2016 and November 2018, Grange Pavilion brought together more than 3,000 residents, was used by over 100 stakeholders, and launched 150 community-led initiatives in response to community-generated ideas resulting in over 1,000 sessions/activities on site. Many projects have formed from this engagement including the Grange Pavilion Youth Forum, a Girls’ Hub, reading sessions, Friends and Neighbours meetings. The planning engagement work made a real difference in the planning outcomes of the project as it allowed constructive conversations between the community and Planners and allowed the scheme to be designed in a way that would suit the community for example how internal and external spaces were designed. In addition, a sympathetic and distinctive design was proposed that tied in well with the listed park setting – taking on board comments from the community.

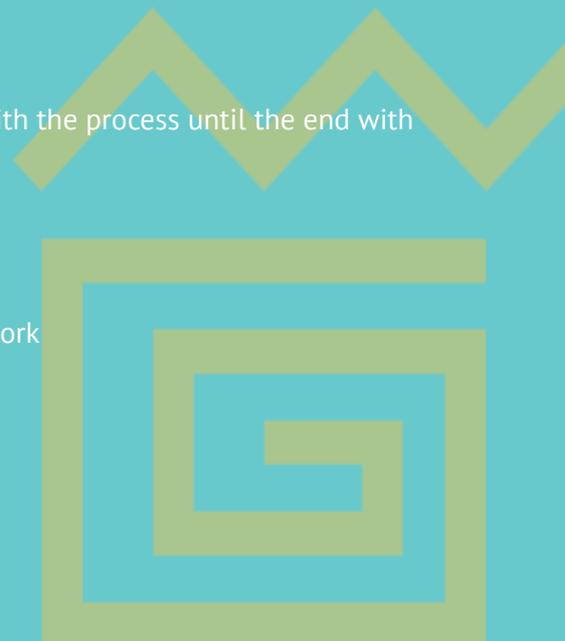
There was a massive growth in consultation and engagement with this project where alternatives were presented. Dan Benham explains “you will lose people in the process if you don’t engage – if people feel part of the project – they will buy into it and will stay with it until the end” This project shows that there needs to be a flow of communication that follows the initial engagement – people need to know why their ideas and comments may not be able to be taken forward – feedback is vital. Dan Benham says “The building is all about people. When the building was finally built – it was their building – the community owned it.

Tips to pass on

- Early communication between designers and LPA
- Introduce innovative engagement techniques - the community will stay with the process until the end with limited drop off
- Continual feedback through the engagement process necessary
- Design Champions within LPA’s and Architectural expertise
- Promote the use of good practice examples from Wales and Europe
- Allow small design teams to be included in LPA frameworks – to bid for work

More information

For more information: <https://grangepavilion.wales/about/>





THEME 4

DECISION-MAKING AND TRANSPARENCY OF OUTCOMES

“Ask the public what they want /their ideas of the LDP consultation process and how they feel is best to involve them/engage with them throughout the process.”
(LPA Officer)

4.1

Make feedback and reporting more prominent and insightful.

There are opportunities to improve feedback and reporting to engagement participants and further research should be undertaken to understand how to better report after each engagement episode to build (added) value over time.

4.2

Build trust with honesty and transparency.

Trust could be fostered and tended to by enabling participants to orientate through a transparent joined-up route through engagement called ‘Place-planning’.

4.3

Enable Local Planning Authority Officers.

Some LPA Officers were unclear of their role in an engagement process and unsure about methods beyond the few routinely used. Even where there is a will to engage resource and time pressures limit space for innovation.

4.4

Agree an engagement process with, not for stakeholders.

Co-production of engagement activities can improve numbers and diversity of participants.



Newtown & Llanllwchaiarn Place Plan

With their Community Plan soon to be out of date and with significant development taking place in Newtown including a new by-pass and health campus, Newtown & Llanllwchaiarn Town Council aspired to engage the community and influence future planning decisions with a Place Plan.

Aims of the project

The Town Council worked in partnership with consultants Planning Aid Wales and Place Studio to develop a plan that will give local “Newtown” detail to the Powys Local Development Plan (2011-2026).

How did they do it?

From day one, the Town Council aimed to work closely with the local community to get their views on land use and other well-being issues that were important to them and to use this evidence to support the plan. Innovative engagement techniques were adopted to start a “conversation” with all those with an interest in Newtown’s future. Powys County Councils planning policy team were involved early in the process and actively encouraged the Place Plan with funding from the Councils Regeneration Team aiding implementation.

What is of Value?

Between January 2019 and January 2021 - 321 people attended events, 106 people responded to an online survey, 48 local organisations were active in the project and 7000 comments were provided. 11 events were held with 10 stakeholder meetings taking place. The successful engagement phase informed the drafting of the Place Plan policies during 2019/20 with the Town Council adopting the Plan in Autumn 2020. Powys County Council has undertaken formal public consultation ready for final adoption and publication of the Place Plan Supplementary Planning Guidance in Summer 2021. The Town Council’s vision to empower the community has been a success and the desire for Newtown inspired policies becoming “material considerations” within SPG will come into fruition if the Place Plan is adopted as SPG. The Place Plan process has had many benefits including a sense of gained planning knowledge locally and enhanced working relationships between the Town Council and County Council. The Plan being the first in Powys has raised the profile of the town and as Richard Edwards, Lead Councillor explains, Newtown is now seen as “a place to do business”.

The Place Plan outlines a clear steer for future work and can be used as evidence to attract external funding. Sorelle White explained “Providing evidence of community need is often at the heart of bids for public money – with good reason! The evidence gathered for the Place Plan has been used in 4 funding applications to date. 2 of those have been successful. The Place Plan evidence undoubtedly strengthened these applications”. To date, the evidence collected as part of the Place Plan project through public consultation has led to a number of successful funding bids including £500k Welsh Government Green Infrastructure and Biodiversity funding and £675k Welsh Government Green Recovery Circular Economy Funding. A £200k bid has been made to the UK’s Government Renewal Fund to deliver on a number of green recovery projects identified in the Place Plan.

Tips to pass on

- At the outset enter into a “conversation” with the local community.
- Be clear on scale, costs & how the Place Plan will fit with other plans.
- Early communication and engagement with the LPA is essential.
- Consider a steering group.
- Good contacts & liaison required with local community groups
- Continual feedback during the engagement process - online newsletters, website updates
- Evidence collected during the Place Plan exercise can be used for funding applications by a range of community stakeholders.

More information

<https://newtown.org.uk/consultations/placeplan.html>





THEME 5

CERTAINTY OF PROCESS AND OUTCOMES

5.1

Make the process smoother.

Certainty of engagement processes support efficient and smooth decision-making, adding value and avoiding risks related to ex-post legal challenges.

“Try, try and try again to emphasise that choices are unlikely to be open-ended and that engagement will be limited to finite choices.”

(LPA Officer)

5.2

Manage expectations.

It is critical that all stakeholders understand what is and is not possible in terms of the outcomes of each stage of engagement and that concrete measures are taken to support expectations management by LPAs.

5.3

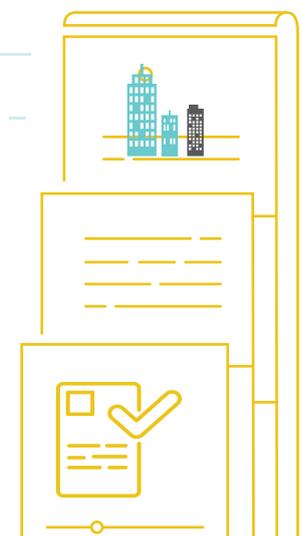
Create shared understanding.

Building local knowledge and shared understanding are excellent examples of added value produced by meaningful engagement practice.

5.4

Appropriate time.

Time (and specifically alignments across Place planning) is of the essence for meaningful engagement.



Pre-application in Rhos-on-Sea

An independent not for profit registered social landlord (RSL) wanted to develop 19 flats within a building within Rhos-on-Sea. A pre-application consultation exercise was undertaken.

How did they do it?

A pre-application consultation event was arranged – which was very well attended – with those attending able to make comments on plans on display and to have discussions with the RSL who were on hand to assist. “at one-point people were queuing to go in” (local Councillor).

What is of Value? / What difference has it made?

The public consultation exercise was well attended with the local community having a chance to express their views. The event was held in a public building close to the development site. Concerns raised included highway and parking concerns, overlooking, overshadowing, number of units proposed and refuse collection issues. The desire of the community to retain the historic façade of the building was also raised at this stage. The overall opinion was that there were several issues to resolve prior to the formal planning application submission. However, communication between the developer and the community in the period between pre-application stage and the formal planning submission stage was lacking with limited follow up and feedback.

Summary

This is a pre-application project where a developer looking to develop a site within a local community that has historic value. To maximise potential of the site, the RSL has proposed 19 flats which local residents feel is over development of the site.

Tips to pass on

- The views of the community need to be taken forward to planning submission stage.
- Feedback and communication with those who attend the pre-application consultation event is essential with feedback on concerns raised.
- Developers involved in Pre-App consultation to keep the community aware of the stages involved – to let the community know when the application has been submitted, the changes that have been made and provide links to the PAC report.
- Early engagement with all parties to be held at pre-app stage – local resident groups, Councillors, CTCs to ensure everyone is made aware of all issues – open dialogue required and ensures trust between all parties.
- Welsh Government to consider a change in procedure – for a meeting to be set up with all relevant parties to meet and discuss all relevant issues prior to a pre-application consultation. Also, for all those that have made comments during the pre-application stage to have sight of the PAC report.

More information

Bay of Colwyn Town Council - <https://www.colwyn-tc.gov.uk/>





THEME 6

COSTS AND EQUITY

6.1

Engage inclusively.

It is critical that using as wide a range of networks and tool as possible to ensure an inclusive engagement process.

6.2

Engage creatively.

Creative approaches to engagement, using specialist expertise where appropriate, can produce more meaningful engagement in a resource-efficient manner.

6.3

Engage online, but with care.

Use of online engagement tools is a cost-effective way to broaden reach, and its potential and limitations for the Welsh context should be recognised.

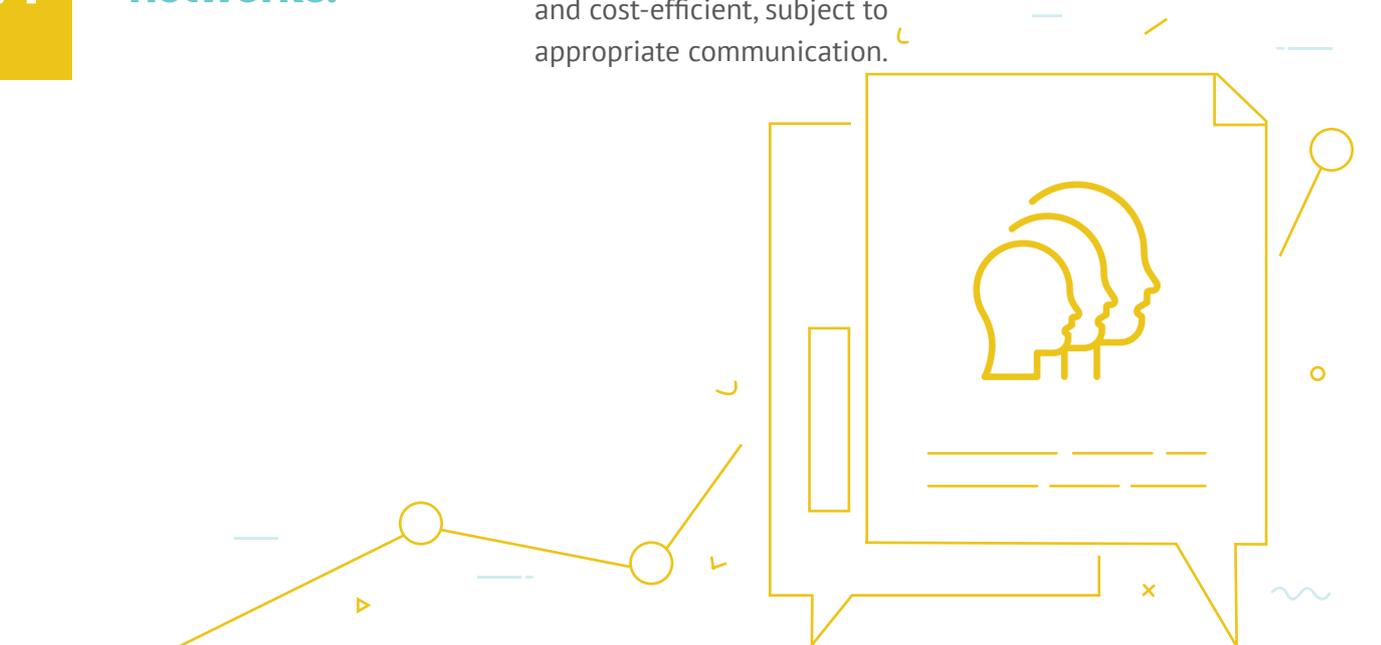
6.4

Build on existing networks.

Using existing community networks can be resource and cost-efficient, subject to appropriate communication.

“Tailoring engagement to the audience can help to engage stakeholders e.g. make engagement more child-friendly with crafts/games where appropriate.”

(Planning Consultant)



Green Infrastructure Action Plan

Pembrokeshire Towns: A Green Infrastructure Action Plan June 2018 has been produced by LUC, on behalf of Pembrokeshire County Council and Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, funded by the WG Environment and Sustainable Development (ESD) Fund. It covers 11 towns.

Aims of the project

The aim of the Plan is to guide green infrastructure improvements within settlements, to be used by public, private and voluntary sector bodies to bring projects forward.

What did they set out to do?

This was a partnership project between two Councils with many Officers engaged from both authorities with the Ecology and Biodiversity Officers being the main contacts. The consultants LUC facilitated an engagement workshop with over 50 stakeholders attending to identify green infrastructure issues and opportunities within each of the towns. It also identified examples of successful initiatives and best practice. It was important to involve local representatives early in the process as they know their areas well and could advise the consultants with their local knowledge.

What is of Value?

By inviting a range of stakeholders with various specialisms and local knowledge, a vast range of issues, opportunities and examples were identified more quickly and in greater detail than would have been achieved by individuals. Early engagement allowed discussions to take place between stakeholders which identified further issues and opportunities. Competing ideas could also be looked at in greater detail. One benefit of engagement that is often unseen is assistance with monitoring at a local level. After a project takes place (particularly a landscape project) there is real need for monitoring on the ground and this is where the community can assist. This is an example of real value in engagement. Philip Smith, LUC suggests “With green and blue infrastructure projects that don’t necessarily have a delivery body – this is where the value of engagement can be seen – volunteers can often oversee the work and monitor”.

Tips to pass on

- Important to define the scope of the project from the outset – so as not to raise expectations. Communication between all parties essential /
- Keeping everyone up to date during the engagement process – not just involving people at the outset/
- Important to think carefully about when to engage and start the engagement early if possible – get the local issues on the table early on in the process.
- Consultants / Planners do not necessarily know the local area – local knowledge is therefore very important – to get to know a place, its distinctiveness and identity.
- Do not rely entirely on one stakeholder event as certain specialist views may not be present.
- At an event it is difficult to obtain all views in a limited timeframe -- need to have an opportunity for further discussion / liaison after such a workshop. The use of additional online engagement may have improved outcomes to reach a wider audience, young people and hard to reach groups.
- Ensure a stakeholder event allows time for individual views to be expressed and guidance given on what is viable within the scope of the project.
- Taking contact details would allow follow up work with individual stakeholders

More information

<https://www.pembrokeshire.gov.uk/conservation/green-infrastructure>

The logo for LUC (Local Urban Conservation) features the letters 'LUC' in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The letters are set against a dark green rectangular background that is part of a larger green graphic element at the bottom right of the page.



CONCLUSION

THE VALUE OF ENGAGEMENT IN PLANNING IN WALES

Conclusion & Recommendations

There are numerous opportunities to improve clarity and continuity, to make the process more transparent and a less technical exercise, to give greater certainty in process and outcomes, and ultimately to create a more equitable process.

This research project has identified strong correlations with the themes identified in academic and professional literature. Value varies according to the perspective of the different actors in the system, but ascertaining a quantitative 'value' from a financial perspective is difficult. There are of course examples of excellent engagement practice in Wales, but this should be tempered with the findings of the Audit Wales report on the effectiveness of Local Planning Authorities in Wales.

There is already a legal framework for change in existence to improve practice; the Well-being of Future Generations Act has begun to shift focus towards better engagement approaches. Developing this framework in the context of spatial thinking with the view of procedurally accompanying decision making at all levels with meaningful engagement to deliver placemaking may be all that is needed to deliver consistently meaningful engagement and add value to the existing process. Place-planning - as a coherent and continuous process extended in time aimed at appropriately involving citizens at all stages of decision making related to land and its uses – could provide the frame for this linking national and strategic planning through local planning processes to the Placemaking Agenda.

This report should be viewed as a first rather than last step; there are many themes and topics that warrant further exploration, critique and evaluation.





THE VALUE OF ENGAGEMENT IN PLANNING IN WALES

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been devised and categorised by their potential deliverability. All of these recommendations could be delivered with the support of Planning Aid Wales unless indicated otherwise.

Quick Wins

- R1. Welsh Government initiates a programme of work that focused on documenting and improving engagement practice in planning through guidance and best practice, prioritising:
 - a) Circulation of a summary of the findings of this report to all stakeholders in the planning system in Wales.
 - b) Preparation of guidance on engagement definitions, approaches and techniques and how they might be applied at all levels of the planning system and in particular, how the Well-being of Future Generations Act can be used to frame better practice in this context. This guidance should encourage the development of approaches in collaboration with community stakeholders.
 - c) Supporting delivery of an ongoing mechanism for gathering and circulating case studies and best practice engagement in planning in Wales.
- R2. Welsh Government encourages Local Planning Authorities and Developers to modify statutory consultation / notification letters to clearly explain opportunities to engage, support development and how and where feedback on responses received can be obtained.
- R3. Welsh Government issues guidance and / or facilitates the delivery of training on effective communication with communities and hard-to-reach groups in the planning process.
- R4. Welsh Government commissions national programmes of training for Local Planning Authorities on innovative engagement practice.
- R5. Welsh Government, Local Planning Authorities and other organisations support the establishment of cross-sector awards on community engagement in planning.

Medium term recommendations

- R6. Welsh Government commissions further research on:
 - a) Defining and measuring engagement outcomes in the planning system.
 - b) Improving the role of elected members in the planning process.
 - c) Overcoming barriers to Place Plan preparation.
- R7. Welsh Government facilitates the delivery more initiatives to raise public awareness and understanding of the planning process, including video guidance and other innovative digital media.

