

Engagement Group Webinar Write up

Thanks very much for your participation in the session. The slides are [here](#). We are taking account of your feedback and intend to use it to create an offer, as The Engagement Group, that will strive to deliver on the discussion content from Thursday's session. This offer will be launching in the next 6-8 weeks. Below is some further context and summary of the discussion.

Introduction

If you believe in community engagement - but have been frustrated with the process and results - we hear you.

Getting the public's input into the design of a place is crucial to creating better places. And yet, often the public engagement process can feel disappointing and unsatisfactory for everyone involved.

But why would a group of organisations, who spend most of their time advocating community engagement, be so indifferent about its current impact?

Well, we want to rethink the way community and stakeholder engagement works and develop an all-in-one approach to help councils, developers and community members collaborate and communicate better throughout the whole process.

The Engagement Group brings together four organisations with a range of complementary skills and experience in the built environment and community engagement. Commonplace, Real Worth, Traverse and Paul Bragman – Community & Economic Regeneration Consultants.



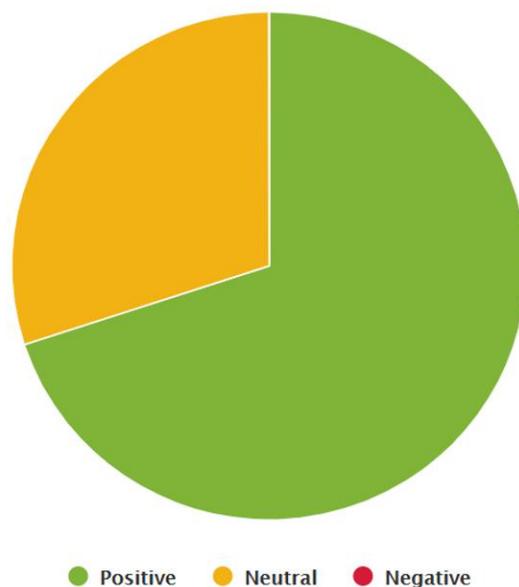
The Engagement Group

The Starting Point

It is well known how essential engagement is to the design of place. However, we are all equally familiar with the backdrop of complexity, controversy, and competing views that create challenges for effective engagement through planning and development processes. Often this leads to unsatisfactory and unproductive outcomes for stakeholders on both sides.

Engagement needs a rethink. It needs to assist councils, authorities, developers, residents, and citizens to collaborate and communicate better throughout the entire process, from A to Z. It needs to catch potential issues right at the outset and maintain a connection with local communities to ensure that concerns are addressed in an appropriate manner. We are proposing a new approach which is more collaborative and creative, that builds a legacy of trust, dialogue and ongoing participation, that creates an open and equal dialogue between all stakeholders throughout development and ongoing into occupation.

Before the webinar we distributed a short survey publicly to understand common experiences of engagement. The results of this survey found that more than two thirds of respondents believe that there needs to be an improvement to current approaches to engagement and consultation. The survey also showed that lots of us want to find methods of improving the process, and that we want to create an inclusive and ongoing dialogue.

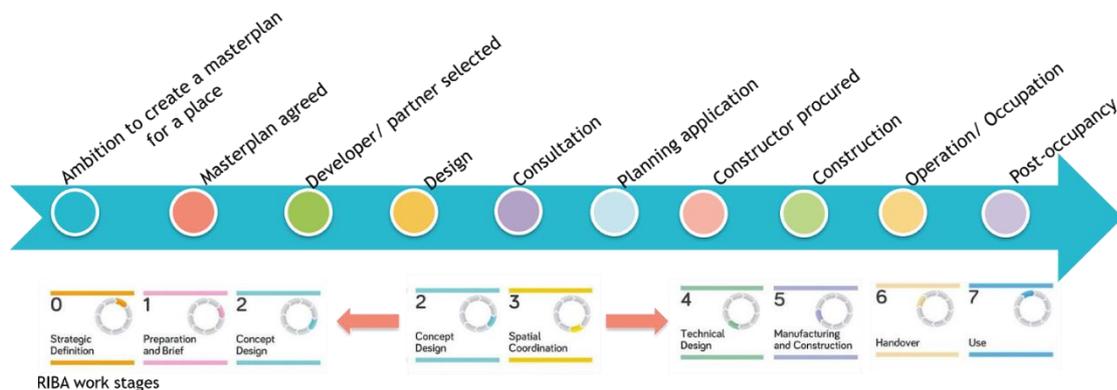


Our Response

The Engagement Group brings together four organisations with a range of complementary skills and experience in the built environment and community engagement. These are RealWorth, Commonplace, Traverse and Paul Bragman Community Regen. We have teamed up to rethink the way community and stakeholder engagement works in the built environment and to develop an offer that can help councils, developers and citizens collaborate and communicate better, from the earliest vision-setting to master-planning, designing, occupation/use and beyond. Our complementary skill sets will help us to create a process from start to finish by understanding what to ask, who to ask and how to engage.

Our vision is a coherent, connected engagement approach which builds throughout the development timeline; which is more creative, inclusive and participatory, generating more valuable insight and greater trust; which marries complementary methods, both through online engagement and through on-the-ground methods; and

which makes social value less abstract and more useful as a vehicle for conversations about the new development.



Discussion Summary

For our inaugural webinar – we were keen to practice what we preach. After presenting our vision for the group we then sought the feedback from a wide selection of community activists/experts/developers to understand their experiences about engagement and what we can do to improve the process.

What gets in the way of effective engagement?

Here are some common themes that emerged from discussions at the webinar.

Timing

What came across overwhelmingly from all groups that we engaged with was; **‘The earlier the involvement the better the outcome.’** Engaging earlier is key to making participants feel like it’s a genuine consultation where they can influence the outcome given the proposals have yet to be finalised.

When engagement occurs too late in consultations, whereby plans have already been made, there is no meaningful way of input. It is in this environment that engagement seems to be a little tokenistic resulting in distrust as people won’t feel like you’ve involved them.

To ensure that community engagement happens at the onset of a project, it needs to be baked into the procurement process. In the words of Peter Drucker. What gets measured, gets managed. Efforts to clearly detail goals and aims of effective consultation during procurement will create accountability and help prioritise engagement early on.

Autonomy

An interesting outcome from our conversations was around the theme of autonomy, i.e stakeholders/developers/ local authorities not necessarily having the resources or capacity to incorporate all of the feedback they are given.

There can be a genuine fear of asking some questions that they perhaps don't want the answers to. During the process of any consultation, there is a fine balance between community wants/expectations and is commercially feasible within the scope of the project.

There's a danger that we can imply that if we try to improve engagement, differences in opinion will disappear - which isn't the case. Disagreements especially on controversial issues will always exist. We must find ways of establishing a common ground.

Trust

Trust is a really important factor. If there isn't trust in the community with the developer or local authority, overcoming that cynicism and trying to convince them that this time they are going to be listened to is a big priority.

Trust in the process is very low. Quite often, developers think that they know what people want and try their best to create a solution that fits those needs. But actually, communities want to be able to be part of that solution and be the ones to help it happen. Even if the intuition of the developer is correct, communities want to feel that they are having it done with rather than having it done to.

It is for this reason it is incredibly important to make sure we close the loop with communities to demonstrate they have been actively listened to. Quite often feedback is collected, and in many cases acted upon, however, this has not then been communicated back to those that gave the feedback in the first place. Regular communications to celebrate changes that have been made and to explain the reasons why some requests cannot be acted upon will help built trust and accountability in the process.

Representation

Finally, representation posed one of the biggest conundrums for our panel. Engaging with diverse stakeholders is difficult to do in big groups given that everyone has different interests and motivations. How can you get a range of different groups in the same space, discussing and agreeing on a common ground but in a non-confrontational way?

Indeed, often people who turn up to consultation events tend to those with strong, negative views. They tend to be 'time rich' and typically more NIMBY and close minded. If you can get feedback from a wider group of people you can get a broader and sometimes more positive picture.

Digital methods provide an excellent opportunity to meet with a wider audience where everyone can have a voice. People who are 'time poor' are far more likely to engage with online tools where they can have an input when they want, where they want. It also helps to get a much younger audience involved, particularly if you can utilise targeted social media advertising to pinpoint typically hard to reach groups.

Digital tools can't be the only solution though. There is still the requirement for offline consultation methods in order to reach sections of the community who are unable to engage online. Older residents, and those who perhaps do not own a device where they can participate still need to be given the platform to engage.

Having a wide range of tools, both physical and digital is very important to capture these different voices and ensure that a broad range of opinions have been captured.

What next?

We intend for this offer to save time and money in the short-term & deliver better social environmental and economic outcomes in the long run. We intend it to move away from "arms-length box-ticking" to an offer that fulfills the three Rs:

- Reliable
- Repeatable
- Relationship-building

The Engagement Group remains open to any follow-up thoughts and offers of possible pilot projects. We have already been asked to do some bespoke webinar sessions with interested organisations, if this is something that would interest you or your organisation please get in touch.

Following a positive reception from attendees we will be running a similar webinar later in the summer to maintain this momentum and build on the progress of improving stakeholder engagement in the built environment.

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