

EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A TOOLKIT

The Greater London Authority

The Social Innovation Partnership
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A TOOLKIT FOR GREATER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This is a toolkit for policymakers in London to explore community engagement types and examples whilst exploring what engagement they need to do. This toolkit is part of a longer report, commissioned by the Greater London Authority and conducted by The Social Innovation Partnership, to examine the current barriers and opportunities that influence engagement, as experienced first-hand, and highlight best practices from across the city, to inform practices moving forward. This research was carried out between March 2023 – September 2023.

Additional resources are available upon request

Contact community.engagement@london.gov.uk for your copy.

Report This toolkit is based on a mapping of existing community engagement activities and approaches across London. Read our report for a detailed understanding of the research behind this toolkit.

Key Insights Document Learn more about the key findings of our research in this easily digestible summary document.

Case Study Pack Find practical examples of all engagement activities listed in this toolkit in our case study pack.



A NEW CLASSIFICATION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Service-user
involvement in voluntary
sector organisations

Community-led
research

Participatory
grantmaking

Community outreach
and information

Community
consultation

Co-design and
co-production

Digital
engagement

Community
campaigning and
advocacy

A non-hierarchical model to overcome limitations in current structures

Community engagement exists on a broad spectrum. Supporting our research activities, we propose a non-hierarchical structure to define community engagement, identifying when and where engagement styles can be used. This new classification helps distinguish and categorise different engagement activities. When deciding which type of activity to use, it should be noted that while some engagement activities may fit into multiple classification types, it will be useful to consider the specific benefits and challenges of each type.

Different types of activities can be combined. For examples of each type of activity, please refer to our report.

Engagement type	Benefit	Challenge
Service user involvement in voluntary sector organisations	Supports experts by experience to play a key role in decision making.	Power dynamics can still play out – often in complex and subtle ways.
Community-led research	Communities can decide on appropriate questions and methods, and how research will enhance rather than extract.	Communities can experience research fatigue, especially if the same issues continue to receive attention.
Participatory grantmaking	Community members decide how money is spent to benefit their community.	Can still advantage organisations that have more fundraising capacity or ability to leverage votes, depending on structures.
Community outreach and information	Can be important for building trust for other forms of community engagement.	There may be issues with accessibility – language, jargon and meeting other access needs.
Community consultation	Depending on how it is set up, it can be an effective and time-efficient way to gather community views.	Can come across as a ‘tick-box’ exercise.
Co-design and/or co-production	Community assets and lived experience are clearly valued.	Needs a significant investment of time and resources to be done well.
Digital engagement	When done well, can reach those who cannot access in-person consultation.	Risk of further excluding those who are already digitally excluded.
Community campaigning and advocacy	Individuals may develop influencing, lobbying, leadership and advocacy skills.	Risk of communities being co-opted and losing independence or power.

THE CONDITIONS FOR BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Whilst the activities within each of the classifications of engagement may look different, we have identified a number of conditions that all stakeholders can contribute to which will help build the most equitable conditions for these activities to be built within.

These conditions underpin building a more relational approach to community engagement. Both communities and policymakers would prefer a more relational approach to engaging with one another. It can take time and patience to develop these conditions.



Building the right environment for effective engagement: 6 factors

Transparent and regular communication

Clear expectations about remit and what can be changed and actioned

Culturally appropriate spaces and conversations

Asking the specific community involved how and where they want to engage

Commitment to the engagement process, shown through resourcing and prioritisation

Action-based follow-up and accountability

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Based on our research findings, we have identified seven recommendations to policymakers, funders, and community members alike to encourage engagement across all levels.

Please note that while some of these recommendations may be better tailored to one specific party, they apply to all who participate in community engagement, and are therefore valuable insights for all people involved.

1. BE CLEAR ABOUT EXPECTATIONS & REMIT

Clear communication helps avoid misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations.

One of the greatest contributors to the breakdown of trust in engagement activities is a miscommunication about the expectations of the parties involved and the remit of what can and cannot be changed due to this specific engagement.

Clear communication can help avoid misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations. Some community organisations develop a local charter of commitments. This can be helpful and adapted to project needs.

It is important for policymakers to be clear about the extent of their power to change different aspects of a topic being discussed. This allows for community members to then decide how comfortable they feel about the engagement process based on that information provided, and in what capacity they want to proceed.

2. GO BACK TO BASICS

We often found the most effective methods to be the simplest. Go to where communities are, and ask them what they need.

We heard from policymakers that some of their most effective engagement was at community centres or faith centres in local communities, with community leaders present and involved in facilitating communication.

Communities are understanding if policymakers are unable to meet particular needs and require clear, honest communication throughout the engagement process. The sentiment from communities is that if policymakers do the 'little things' well, relationships between themselves and community members often naturally fall into place.

3. PRIORITISE A RELATIONAL APPROACH

To help rebuild trust within communities it's crucial to put them first through prioritising engagement within policymaking.

When organisational infrastructure poses a barrier to relational engagement, cultural and infrastructural changes within organisations are required to ensure relationships with communities are centralised. These changes need to be mandated from the top down and require buy-in from senior management.

This can look like protecting time and capacity for staff members to engage with communities and deepen relationships.

4. IMPROVE KNOWLEDGE-SHARING

Improving how knowledge can be shared is crucial for innovation and capturing best practice.

Policymakers could provide avenues for this through funding and capacity building, for example, by creating a London-wide network of participatory grantmakers. Many are interested in the process of participatory grantmaking but are unsure of best practice. A network can facilitate peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and strengthen partnership working.

When communicating impact to communities, feedback methods should take the community's needs into account and where possible, they should be co-created with communities directly. A 'You Said, We Did' approach and digital and physical updates in community forums are examples of this.

5. ENSURE EVERYONE IS RESPONSIBLE

Community engagement should be everyone's responsibility, rather than fall within the remit of a few departments.

If the role of the organisation is to serve the needs of the community, there needs to be a greater commitment organisation-wide to ensure that all are actively engaging and visible to communities.

For example, a community organisation that has a poor relationship with one department within an organisation might be unwilling to engage with another department in the same organisation.

It can be helpful to map out who holds different relationships and the nature of the connection. This will highlight relationships that still need to be developed and require organisations to deepen their intra-departmental relationships.

6. REMUNERATE COMMUNITIES FOR THEIR ENGAGEMENT

Communities need to be remunerated for their engagement to achieve a fair and balanced relationship between policymakers and the community.

This also symbolises to community members that their time and inputs have been valued.

While many organisations actively remunerate community engagement, there is varied practice in the sector.

Monetary exchange may not be the only option – for example, if policymakers can offer training, skills or other resources this can balance the exchange and avoid extraction within the engagement.

7. USE A MIXED-METHOD APPROACH

Accessibility and inclusivity repeatedly emerged as a barrier to effective community engagement. Using different methods of engagement allows you to target a wide range of voices within the community.

Different community members will feel comfortable or have time to engage in different capacities. Whilst a survey format may suit some individuals, a phone call may be necessary for others to engage before deciding to commit to longer term engagement.

Additionally, whilst face-to-face engagement is crucial to building trust with some communities, others need digital formats to engage.

Use the Community Engagement Classification model to help you identify the best engagement practice based on your objectives.



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