

# MAPPING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICE

## KEY INSIGHTS

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Commissioned by the Greater London Authority  
Conducted by The Social Innovation Partnership

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# Key Insights: An introduction

## The purpose of this document

This Key Insights document 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 standardise and inform practices moving forward.

The purpose of this insights document is to highlight key findings including cross-sector mapping, barriers and enablers, conditions for effective engagement and a classification of engagement activities.

## About this research

In 2023, the GLA commissioned The Social Innovation Partnership to conduct a mapping of community engagement activity across London. As part of this mapping, we investigated the types of engagement that exist between communities and different stakeholders. We focused on collecting primary data and desk-based research to hear first-hand stories around engagement from community members, policymakers, funders and other organisation representatives.

The mapping process allowed us to see the types of engagement that are currently happening across London, and which key barriers and enablers are shaping that engagement. From here we produced a new classification of engagement types, a set of conditions needed for effective community engagement, as well as key recommendations. This research was carried out between March 2023 – September 2023.

### Additional resources are available upon request

Contact [community.engagement@london.gov.uk](mailto:community.engagement@london.gov.uk) for your copy.

**Report** Read our full report for a detailed understanding of the research behind the key insights presented in this document.

**Toolkit** Get practical recommendations on how to improve community engagement across the board using our toolkit for effective community engagement.

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



# Key Insights: A new classification of engagement

## Our finding: A non-hierarchical model to overcome limitations in current structures

While the Ladder of Participation has been crucial to developing theory and practice around engagement, the hierarchical structure also presents limitations. There can be a tendency to view lower rungs on the ladder as 'less advisable' than higher rungs, although lower-rung methods of collaboration may be more suitable in certain situations.

This is why we suggest using a non-hierarchical model instead, ensuring fair participation processes in all situations. See below for a classification of engagement activities that exist across London. Please see the Toolkit to explore how the classification can be used in practice.

**Please note:** This is a summary of our findings. For more benefits and challenges, as well as examples of each type of activity, please refer to the report and toolkit.

| Engagement type   | Benefit   | Challenge   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Service user involvement in voluntary sector organisations</b> | Supports experts by experience to play a key role in decision making.   | Power dynamics can still play out – often in complex and subtle ways.                                     |
| <b>Community-led research</b>                                     | 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. |
| <b>Participatory grantmaking</b>                                  | Community members decide how money is spent to benefit their community.   | Can still advantage organisations with more fundraising capacity or ability to leverage votes.            |
| <b>Community outreach and information</b>                         | Can be important for building trust for other forms of community engagement.                                    | May pose accessibility issues – language, jargon and meeting other access needs.                          |
| <b>Community consultation</b>                                     | 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.   |
| <b>Co-design/co-production</b>                                    | Community assets and lived experience are clearly valued.   | Needs a significant investment of time and resources to be done well.                                     |
| <b>Digital engagement</b>   | When done well, can reach those who cannot access in-person consultation.                                       | Risk of further excluding those who are already digitally excluded.                                       |
| <b>Community campaigning and advocacy</b>                         | Individuals may develop influencing, lobbying, leadership and advocacy skills.                                  | Risk of communities being co-opted and losing independence or power.                                      |

# Key Insights: Cross-sector review

Within the cross-sector review we mapped local government engagement activities to distinguish the spread and depth of engagement in different boroughs. We also did a deep dive into three thematic sectors; arts and culture, housing and environment.

## What does community engagement look like for local councils in London?

One key challenge we heard from policymakers was sharing cross-sector learning. Within councils specifically, we heard that sharing learning around engagement can be hard. The landscape of community engagement across London's local councils is extremely varied. Under regulations, all local councils are required to do a minimum level of community involvement. While it was clear that some councils kept to this minimum statutory requirement, our research revealed that other councils go well beyond this by setting out their own bespoke and extensive strategies, such as:

- Community engagement frameworks to identify principles for engagement.
- Community champions and advocates who work to build spaces which connect people.
- Co-design through involving local people and organisations in the development of various strategies.
- Co-production networks set up to connect community members and council members.

## Examples of innovative practice

- **Urban Rooms** are an increasingly popular initiative used within London and across the UK to bring local people together to discuss issues and form solutions for their local area. Our case study pack details examples of local authorities in London embracing participation and outputs from urban rooms.
- **Participatory grantmaking** is an approach that is getting more traction across London boroughs, as shown through networks like London's Giving. Participatory grantmaking aims to give funding decisions to local people about local issues, and we have seen examples of local councils proactively supporting this style of funding aims to give funding decisions to local people about local issues, and we have seen examples of local councils proactively supporting this style of funding.
- **Citizens assemblies** are a third style of engagement used by some councils in London. Citizens assemblies involve bringing together a large group of residents to exercise democratic conversation and decision making. The selection of residents in these assemblies aims to be representative of the demographics of the borough.

Within this research we also carried out an in-depth mapping of three sectors; Arts and Culture, Housing, and the Environment to map the types of engagement activities happening. There are opportunities here for organisations to learn about the challenges and what has worked well across different sectors.

On the next page, we explore which types of engagement activities from the classification are seen frequently in each sector. For more examples of activities within each sector, please refer to the report.

# Key Insights: Cross-sector review

## What does community engagement look like across sectors?



### Arts & Culture

The main activities in this sector involve community outreach, sharing of information, and service user involvement. Partnerships across the community are common and more examples of co-production, participatory grant making, and co-design is seen in this sector than in any other.

We also see many innovative types of engagement activities to address sensitive issues around power and mental health.



### Housing

There is a high level of community outreach and engagement, alongside examples of community campaigning. Activities range from direct urgent relief to community action to support marginalised communities in poor housing conditions.

Engagement around housing is also closely linked to regeneration in many boroughs in London. In this context, an approach to engagement must be culturally sensitive and tailored to the history of the communities in those areas.



### Environment

Community engagement ranges from advocacy to direct action with authorities, and many examples of community campaigning can be found. Creative methods of engagement are common in this sector.

We heard from policymakers that they found it difficult to engage residents on issues related to the environment, as other issues like housing were prioritised by residents.

Across all sectors – we were able to draw out key enablers and barriers that are likely to affect the engagement process.

# Key Findings: Enablers and barriers

We explored in depth a range of barriers and enablers around engagement. We identified three key themes that affect the conditions of engagement:

# 1

## Trust & Mistrust

Trust and relationships are integral to successful community engagement practices.

- All stakeholders prefer relational rather than transactional approaches when working with communities. These approaches prioritise longer term engagement, open and clear communication, development of new skills and knowledge exchange.
- Current organisational infrastructures tend not to be conducive to relational approaches. For example, when departments work in silos and don't share data or research they may repeat research on certain communities that contributes to research fatigue and extractive research practices.
- Creating space for feedback is crucial to create trust.

# 2

## Accessibility

Accessibility is a central issue, and barriers to engagement are varied.

- Digital formats have made participation easier for community members.
- Digital exclusion, however, is an increasing barrier among older and lower-income groups.
- Language barriers can deter people from participating and feel unwelcome.

# 3

## Capacity & Prioritisation

All stakeholders mention factors that can reduce their capacity to participate.

- Being overstretched and exhausted makes it hard to find capacity for often unpaid opportunities.
- Project-based funding hinders the creation of sustainable community engagement models.
- Community engagement is often seen as a part of marketing rather than a key component of the work. Hence it's often added on at the end of projects, rather than embedded into the working structures.



# Key Finding: Conditions for effective engagement

Through understanding the barriers and enablers around engagement – we have drawn up conditions that will underpin each type of activity in the classification to promote equitable engagement:

## How can councils help turn extraction of communities into empowerment of communities?

### 1. One size does not fit all

There is no one approach to effective community engagement or co-production.

Councils leading in best practice take proactive steps to implement long-term visions and strategies that are specific to their localities, while others don't venture far from the statutory minimums and 'tick boxes'.

### 2. Validate the expertise of the community

Successful cases of community engagement are grounded in principles of validation of community members. This is done by:

- Honouring their lived experience.
- Exercising the power of voice, transparency, deep listening and trust.
- Acknowledging that 'expert' knowledge in this case means local knowledge.
- Emphasising collaboration.
- Centering relationships.

From the mapping, we summarised the conditions all stakeholders can contribute to build effective community engagement:

Transparent and regular communication

Clear expectations about remit and what can be changed and actioned

Culturally appropriate spaces and conversations

Commitment to the engagement process, shown through resourcing and prioritisation

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

Action-based follow-up and accountability