

Designing places with people

Tips for your community engagement strategy





Our buildings and spaces bring people together and must cater for many different uses and needs. Whether community centres, places of worship, schools, or any other public-facing building or open space, their design must respond to diverse interests and to the ever changing circumstances of the people and communities around them.

For those leading projects to transform buildings and spaces, engaging with communities can add huge value to the design process, as well as help build valuable support for a project.

A collaborative approach to design can happen at any scale, and be led by any community or sector. It can help improve place quality and equality, and has enormous potential to build in empowerment and social value opportunities that go far beyond bricks and mortar. As well as mobilising local interest and support in a project, a well-designed engagement strategy can enrich the design process, drawing on local knowledge, skills, creativity and networks to shape better informed and more sustainable design.

This resource has been designed to help those leading a project to develop or transform a building, space or neighbourhood, and the design professionals working with them, to develop an engagement strategy to support a collaborative design process. Using a series of questions, prompts and snapshots, this resource aims to help you think more strategically and holistically about how to develop a strategy for inviting local people and stakeholders into your design process. This can help better connect engagement to design decision-making, and avoid the pitfalls of conflict and delays. It can also help you inject social value and local impact into the design process itself, not just the built outcomes.

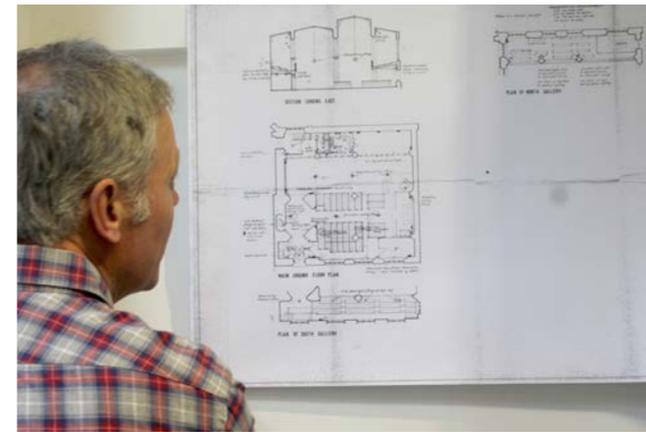
Involving local people can lead to more informed, imaginative and sustainable solutions. A collaborative design process can:

Unlock local knowledge

Local people hold valuable knowledge and expertise on their local area and places, which can help improve the vision, brief and design quality.

Mobilise local assets

Every place has a wealth of skills, resources and networks. Working with local people and organisations can help unlock and mobilise local assets that can contribute to the success of a project.



Enable agency and ownership

If local people are involved in the design of a place they will feel a greater sense of agency, ownership and respect for the place and be more willing to invest in its success.

Unleash expertise and creativity

Each of us holds a unique and complex combination of creativity and both experiential and professional expertise. Participating in a collaborative design process can help people use this in new ways – for their own satisfaction and for the benefit of their community.

Build social capital

A collaborative design process can offer numerous opportunities to build confidence, develop new life skills and enhance employability. It can also help foster local relationships and networks, and build social cohesion.

If done well, collaborative design can provide a clear and transparent process to transform a place. This starts with being able to answer some key questions:

- 1 Why should people get involved?
- 2 How will involvement affect decision-making?
- 3 How can people get involved?
- 4 What can those engaging contribute?
- 5 What are your engagement objectives?
- 6 How will you use your engagement outputs?
- 7 How can engagement add social value?

The sections that follow will help you explore these questions to inform your engagement strategy.



1 Why should people get involved?

How is this particular design project relevant to people, and how might changes that occur as a result of it affect them?

A broad spectrum of people and organisations interact with any place, and they will have a mix of concerns and hopes for changes to their local buildings and spaces. Consider how you might engage with: current and potential users; local community organisations and interest groups; your local authority, schools, and service providers; faith communities, historical societies, networks and membership bodies; neighbouring housing areas and businesses; investors and funders etc, all of whom might have an interest in what happens there.

An effective engagement strategy should invite in a range of voices and interests. It should communicate a sense of opportunity to take part in a collaborative process to improve a place and what is on offer there. An engagement strategy that welcomes people in as contributors, rather than just commentators, sets a better path for collaboration and can lead to people working together to help a place thrive after the builders leave.

Engagement activities are more attractive to people if they feel they will get something out of participating. As well as giving people a role in shaping changes to your buildings and spaces, think about what else your engagement activities can offer to those who participate. Community engagement should never be a one-way street. Always think about what it can offer people alongside what you hope to gain from it.

2 How will engagement affect decision-making?



People need to know what difference their contribution will make to decision-making, and where the opportunities for influence lie. Setting out clear project parameters, outlining which elements of the project are already fixed, and where participation can help inform and shape decisions, is absolutely crucial.

Ensuring that participation in decision-making is not just tokenistic, but genuinely helping to inform the vision, brief and iterative design journey, is essential to a successful participatory design process.

3 How can people get involved?

People need to understand the mechanics of getting involved in a design process. The range of opportunities for interaction might vary enormously depending on the context, scale of the project, commissioning client or local interest. However, in every case, there is value in a clear strategy that sets out a design process and the means for supporting the iterative dialogue around it.

Are the meetings and other engagement activities open to anyone who wants to join in? Will formal steering or advisory groups be convened, and if so, how does someone join such a group? Are there specific criteria for who can take part in any of the engagement activities? Will there be single or multiple opportunities to express opinions, to contribute ideas, to step into a creative co-design space?

People will be able and inclined to engage in different ways, and with different levels of commitment, and traditional consultation approaches do not always enable good representation. Only some people will take the time to fill in a questionnaire, and not everyone will feel comfortable or be able to attend a meeting or take part in a steering group. It is essential to create opportunities for people of different ages, cultural backgrounds, experiences and abilities to contribute in ways that are both meaningful and empowering.

If people understand what the opportunities are to engage, and there is a spectrum of opportunities accessible to them, they are better able to choose the way that best suits their availability, level of interest, confidence and/or skills.



4 What can those engaging contribute?

The active engagement of local people in the design process can unlock valuable assets. Here are just a few:

Relationships and connections

Connections with other local people and organisations can help extend the reach and richness of the engagement process, and can also help build the networks and partnerships that will support the success of the place in the long term.

Creativity

There is great opportunity in opening up ideas generation and creative thinking. While this has to be managed through a clear process, it can be the source of locally driven innovation that responds to issues and opportunities in new ways that are borne out of and responsive to local context.



User experience and knowledge

Whether this is of the local area in which a project sits, or of how a particular type of place (such as a youth centre, school, hospital etc.) works, experiential knowledge is an invaluable resource to a design team.

Investment

Getting involved in shaping a place makes people more willing to invest in its success. This investment might be the time and energy to contribute to the dialogue, or could be a contribution to the assets required to bring a project to fruition, or to enliven the place once transformed.

Complementary activities that add value

Engaging with local people may unearth other initiatives in the area that are complementary to a scheme or project. Working together can make the process for change more efficient and enhance the impact and legacy of both large and small projects in the area.



5 What are your engagement objectives?

When planning an engagement strategy, consider which activities are best suited to your different engagement objectives. Here are some key top-level engagement objectives that can help improve your design process:

● Map the local context

Good design starts with clear information about the context and about need. There are various ways that engagement activities can help you identify and better understand:

- who lives, works, plays, and visits
- local activities, amenities, services
- local issues and need
- potential future users and beneficiaries

● Identify and activate potential collaborators and partners

Engagement can help attract and mobilise collaboration. Certain engagement activities can help identify people and organisations that share your objectives and concerns, and who could potentially become partners and contributors to your project. They can also help you align your project with other local projects that complement yours.

● Communicate your process, parameters and progress

Clear communication and transparency are vital to any engagement process, and engagement activities open up a variety of mechanisms for communicating information about your project.

● Generate and test ideas

Design is a creative and iterative process. Engagement can offer a valuable space to work collaboratively to develop and test ideas with future users and local people.

● Build design capacity

Sometimes, it is helpful to build confidence and a more in-depth understanding of design thinking, the stages, process and language of design within the core working group and among key stakeholders. This makes for more confident and informed design input.

● Mobilise support and funding

Engagement activities can offer a space to get people interested and involved, and create opportunities to gather data and evidence to build support and attract funding.

6 How will you use your engagement outputs?

Engagement activities can provide a wealth of useful data to help inform decisions, make connections and build support.

Think about how what you gather through engagement activities will serve specific engagement objectives, and how they will connect with and contribute to the various stages of design.

Keeping an accurate record of your various activities, who has participated, and the information, views and ideas you have collected, is essential to building an evidence base to support your decision-making. This can serve your project well, and can help make your design process more transparent and accountable to those engaging with it.

Engaging with people and communities will bring you into contact with a diversity of voices, ideas and stories, and these can help you weave a powerful narrative about how the design journey fits into the local context, and how it is connecting with local people. Capturing these voices, views and ideas in a variety of different ways, and in a range of formats and media, can help you communicate with others, invite people into your journey, share progress on your project, and build support.



Our companion resource, **Making community engagement count**, was designed to help you think strategically about why and how you gather data through your engagement activities, and how you can use it to drive your project forward. It provides useful tips to help you think how to collect data, and how it will serve your design process. It also provides a series of example engagement tools and methods to help you plan your activities.

For a digital version of either resource, visit the Empowering Design Practices website.

7 How can engagement add social value?

Being given the agency to take part in a design process and being able to participate in local decision-making is hugely empowering and its value should not be underestimated. However, every engagement activity also has the potential to offer something more to the community in which it is taking place.

Consider how your engagement activities can help build social capital, through:



Giving voice to diverse and under-represented people and interests

Traditional consultation activities struggle to capture the voices of diverse sections of a community. A spectrum of creative and interactive engagement activities can help bring new voices to the fore, and help people express themselves in a variety of ways.



Helping to build local connections and networks

Collaborative design processes can get people and organisations working together, and can be catalytic for activating new relationships and networks that support future collaborations.



Building empathy and understanding across diverse members of the community

When people work together towards shared objectives, they find that they have more in common than not. Engagement activities that bring people together through shared dialogue and activities can help them bond over those things they do have in common, and better understand and empathise with different perspectives on issues that are important to them.



Unlocking confidence, skills and employability

Collaborative design engagement strategies can create opportunities for people to unearth and enhance their confidence, knowledge, skills and creativity. Organising engagement activities that help you move your project forward, and at the same time offer new, or build on existing community development, educational and employment opportunities can dramatically increase your project's potential for social impact.

Use this legend with the snapshots to explore how engagement activities can help meet objectives while adding social value.

Meet engagement objectives

- Map the context
- Identify & activate collaborators
- Communicate process and progress
- Build design capacity
- Generate and test ideas
- Mobilise support and funding

Add social value

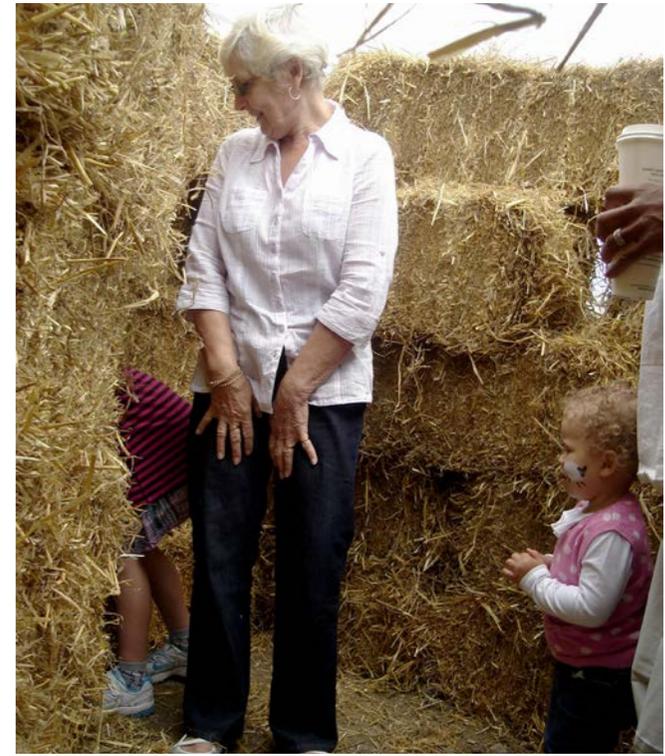
- 🗣️ Give voice to diverse people & interests
- 👥 Help build local connections
- ❤️ Build empathy and understanding
- 👛 Unlock confidence, skills & employability



Local families got together at this housing association community engagement event to map play in their area.



A city farm used straw bales to engage their users in exploring how a new building might be added to their site, and what space it might occupy.



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This community group worked with local stakeholders to assess local interest and need for soft play provision in the area. They mapped assets and local connections to explore resourcing their project.



While providing an accessible half-term play day, they asked participating children and their parents to help map which activities and equipment they liked best.



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During Design Training courses for groups looking after places of worship and other community buildings, participants learn about the principles and stages of design, and work together to test design ideas for their buildings. They can also consider how the specific qualities of their building, community and local context (such as location and site topography, uses, heritage features, faith practices etc.) might influence their design decisions.



Creating rough models of the buildings can help participants better understand their buildings, test design ideas and articulate their vision and brief to their design team. Models can also provide a useful tool for engaging the wider community in exploring the future of their building.



Visiting completed design and refurbishment projects can help inform and inspire groups as well as offering valuable insight from those who led the projects and those who use the buildings and spaces.

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At this event, local people worked collaboratively to explore and test co-designed city spaces around a pivotal building. Using a model prepared by local university students, participants created and added their own design elements.



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In the first of these engagement events, people were asked to share their views on what could improve the area.



Local residents and organisations then gathered to further explore ideas collected at the first event, in order to co-design and prototype physical adaptations to local spaces.



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This collaboration with a developer and a secondary school gave young people the opportunity to learn about design and development, while contributing to a live large-scale regeneration scheme in their local area.

The programme included a number of workshops and site visits for the young people, where they shared their views, reflections and design ideas with scheme project leaders, the Board of Directors and local people. Some students went on to do work placements with the developer.



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Young people can offer an invaluable take on how public spaces are working. These young people visited a number of local green spaces and mapped their views on how the spaces were working.

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In this workshop for secondary school students, the students were taught to use media tools to express their views about the design of their school and the quality of the places and spaces within it.



A space for expression...



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Whenever you reach out to a community, be mindful of how you are interacting with them, and how you can best respect their autonomy, privacy and dignity. Do your best to understand and respect the varying customs and social norms, levels of confidence, skills and experience of those you engage. Give people a range of ways to articulate and defend their views and ideas. All of those participating should be treated with the same degree of respect and consideration, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, education, socio-economic position and so on.

Your motivations should be made clear, and be supported by transparent and accountable processes. In simple terms, people need to understand why you are asking them for information, views and ideas, and how they will be used. They will want to see how what they contribute informs decision-making and helps shape the project.

Remember that any collaborative design process is an iterative journey, and it is important to set out and continue to communicate through clear stages of decision-making that people can understand, and to which they can contribute.

Above all, your engagement should begin with the principle that it will do no harm, and on the contrary, that it can help improve the social impact and value of your project.

Always ask yourself how you would feel if you or a loved one were invited into your engagement strategy.



Acknowledgements

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i. & ii. Sharing and modelling design ideas for a new green space
iii. Young people visiting a live construction site
iv. Presenting to the St James board of Directors.
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Back cover: Participant contribution from workshop on community-led housing, The Glass-House with London Community Neighbourhood Co-operative © The Glass-House Community Led Design

This resource was written and designed in 2019 by The Glass-House Community Led Design on behalf of the Empowering Design Practices research project.

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Some sections of this text were adapted from a chapter authored by Sophia de Sousa in the book *Social Value in Construction*, Raiden, Loosemore, King & Gorse, Routledge, 2019

Empowering Design Practices is a research project exploring how community-led design can help empower those who look after historic places of worship to create more open, vibrant and sustainable places that respect and enhance their heritage. Working within this context, the project aims to develop insights and mechanisms (approaches, resources, training) to support community-led design and the development of places that connect and serve their communities.

Empowering Design Practices (2014-2020) is a collaboration between The Open University, The Glass-House Community Led Design, Historic England, Heritage Lottery Fund and the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance, working with consultants Stephen Smith (Wright & Wright Architects), Leo Care (Live Works) and Becky Payne. The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, under the Connected Communities and Design highlight notice.

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