Hackney, a place for everyone

Like many inner London boroughs, the pace of socio-economic and demographic change in Hackney has been rapid and has impacted on the council's relationship with residents. As house prices have risen, socio-economic divisions between private renters, owners and social tenants have grown, creating contrasting experiences of living in the borough and interacting with services. This has created a greater need for the council to develop a shared vision for the type of place residents want to see.

Engagement has been viewed as a vital part of this task, as a basis for place leadership and for building the networks and capacity to involve residents in shaping the council response to challenges. It has been viewed as a long-term process, where relationships are valued and trust earnt. To achieve this, focus has been placed on engaging early and extensively – with the aim of building a shared agenda to allow meaningful dialogue about specific service changes.

Hackney are part way through this journey. They began with a borough-wide research and engagement piece ('Hackney: A Place for Everyone'). Initial engagement provided an opportunity to trial new forms of engagement alongside traditional types. To mitigate against the risk of the 'usual suspects' turning up, a range of activities were designed to reach out to different groups and amplify their voices. Council staff attended more than 50 locations, including markets, train stations, festivals, health services and cultural events, to do this. New techniques gave residents a chance to tell their stories on camera in the back of a specifically-designed 'I Love Hackney' black taxi.

Bespoke engagement with hard-to-reach segments was developed to engage young black men, those with disabilities, those in temporary accommodation and the LGBT community. Co-produced, policy emerged through smaller sessions. These included deliberative discussions on specific issues like licensing and housing.

Alongside these engagement approaches, a 1000-sample representative survey was conducted and over 3000 questionnaires returned. Together these provided a robust evidence base to complement the data collection from the other forms of engagement.

The findings, learning and brand from this process has provided a platform for future internal and external engagement. Internally a staff engagement piece sharing the brand – 'Hackney Change for Everyone' – has embedded the messages and approach as part of a unified internal narrative.

Externally, as part of the pilot the learning, relationships and themes from 'Hackney a Place for Everyone' have been used to assist a pre-engagement exercise around education, called 'Hackney: Schools for Everyone'. Rather than launching into specific consultations, this is a borough-wide engagement around the type of school residents want, how that fits in to their sense of place and the role of the council in this area.

Several groups were highlighted as likely to yield lower responses or have specific needs with regard to schooling, and bespoke methods were used for the engagement. As part of building engagement capacity across the organisation, social housing tenants were engaged through a 'whole citizen approach'. This meant rather than these tenants being engaged with by different departments of the authority depending on the issue, the staff with the closest relationships were used to conduct the engagement work. This has the advantage of being efficient, through processes already being in place and enabling the development of more meaningful relationships between residents and the organisation to be built.

A key element of this engagement was deliberative events and bespoke activities with hard-to-reach groups. The deliberative events were recruited using Hackney's 'e-panel'. The e-panel used quota recruitment methods to achieve a range of participants' representative of Hackney as a whole. This targeted engagement allowed the council to fully represent resident groups with historically low levels of participation in council consultation exercises. This includes social housing tenants, and those with specific needs relating to the issue of schools (such as the orthodox Jewish community).

At the events themselves, independent facilitators, officers and cabinet members guided focused discussions to directly capture residents' views. The goal was to move discussions from one-way insight gathering, satisfaction exercises, to meaningful two-way engagement. This 'deliberative approach' allows a dialogue around decision-making to be shaped through discussion.

Through developing assets, networks and relationships to assist with upcoming engagement challenges, Hackney is, therefore, moving towards a relationship with residents based on shared understanding, meaningful dialogue, and the inclusion of all elements of the population.