New Conversations 2.0
LGA guide to engagement
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Foreword

Nobody doubts the importance of engaging with residents at a time when public services are undergoing fundamental change. The risks of transforming the services without giving people a genuine stake in that process are huge.

It has been said that engagement is everybody’s responsibility in a local authority, but all too often it ends up being nobody’s. In reality, good dialogue with residents and securing mutual trust between the council and the community needs to be part of the whole council’s DNA.

So how do we effectively engage at a time when resources are scarce? How do we build and maintain trust when difficult decisions are being taken? What are the legal pitfalls that need to be navigated during a period of unprecedented reform?

It was in an effort to provide constructive answers to these questions that New Conversations was compiled two years ago.

The LGA and The Campaign Company produced the guide with the explicit aim of helping councils to strengthen trust and build resilience in the face of fast change, low trust and small budgets. It was a comprehensive guide to engaging, enabling better dialogue with residents at every level, from consultation through to people’s everyday interactions with the local authority.

At the time, in 2016, research showed that local government faced these challenges from a position of strength. Around seven in ten people were satisfied with the way their council ran things. The latest round of LGA residents’ satisfaction polling, carried out in October 2018, puts satisfaction with the way councils run things at just 60 per cent.

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1 ‘Polling on resident satisfaction with councils’, LGA, October 2016, p.12
2 ‘Polling on resident satisfaction with councils’, LGA, October 2018, p.11
This is perhaps unsurprising given the context of the past two years. Since 2016, local government has continued to experience funding pressures, with many councils forced to take tough decisions on which services should be scaled back or stopped altogether to plug funding gaps. The country has also experienced the Grenfell tragedy, rising anxieties around cohesion and regeneration, and Brexit negotiations where there are countless different interpretations of the ‘will of the people’. Added to this, digital technology has again accelerated, and best practice around engagement has evolved.

New Conversations 2.0 is a refresh of the original guide, including four new chapters and many extra resources. Following two years of taking the guide ‘on the road’ and gaining feedback, the refreshed guide is leaner, with a more usable design and an external Asset Library.

Local government remains uniquely placed to build trust and confidence with communities, and within communities. As we approach the third decade of the 21st century, we hope New Conversations 2.0 helps you to engage with residents in open, innovative, and authentic ways.

Councillor Judi Billing
Deputy Chair, LGA Improvement and Innovation Board
Introduction

“Look, we know you’re working hard for us, but what we’ve got here is a parent–child relationship between the Government and the people. What we need is an adult–adult relationship.” Citizen at a public meeting in Colorado

Why this guide matters

These are potentially daunting times for local government. Expectations are rising and budgets are getting smaller. Services are better, but trust in many institutions is falling. Communities are frequently more able and willing to step up, but they’re also less deferential, and when things go wrong, they come armed with the tools of judicial review, Freedom of Information requests and social media.

In this context, a serious effort to involve and understand residents is more important than ever. Satisfaction with local government remains fairly high compared to other organisations, and this provides local authorities with both opportunity and responsibility. By grasping what people need and what they can do for themselves, authorities can work better with communities and be more efficient. And by bringing people in on decision-making, councils can get decisions right, manage expectations and improve relationships with residents.

Through creative engagement approaches, organisations can tackle the cohesion issues and combative dealings with residents that low-trust relationships often generate. And they can minimise the risk of judicial reviews as well as many of the connected reputational challenges that occur when the connection between citizens and council breaks down.

For more information about why this guide matters, go to The context for this guide.

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3 ‘The Next Form of Democracy’, Matt Leighninger, 2006 – quoted by RSA
4 ‘Polling on resident satisfaction with councils’, LGA, October 2018
What has changed?

Published two years ago, ‘New Conversations’ was a comprehensive LGA guide to community engagement. It was based on pilots at four local authorities (GMCA, Harlow, Hackney and Staffordshire).

Since then there have been significant changes to the wider social context, including the Grenfell tragedy, Brexit negotiations and regeneration controversies, particularly in London. These have increased the emphasis on building trust and strengthening communities.

There have also been several new pieces of insight, including the LGA’s ‘One Community’ guide and documents such as the Casey Review, which looked at trust within communities. Digital channels, which are increasingly a central plank of engagement, have also evolved considerably.

Meanwhile, in addition to two New Conversations launch events, there have been workshops about the initial guide at over 50 councils. These have shone a light on the strengths and weaknesses of New Conversations, helping to identify areas where people need more guidance.

At a time where change is happening fast on several fronts, this refresh is an attempt to reflect these shifts. There are several changes and new features:

• **An Asset Library for engagement, with over 60 useful documents to browse through.** This includes all the tools, rules, tests, stories and knowledge from the original guide, in one place. There are also more than 20 new ones to look out for. At the end of each chapter, the guide links out to particularly relevant materials and resources in the Asset Library.

• **A stripped-down guide, with greater interactivity and a new look and feel.** This is shorter and easier to navigate, and includes clickable tabs down the side for the sub-sections. Some of the previous material, including the four pilots, is now in the Asset Library. This should mean a lot less scrolling!

• **Five new pillars, addressing different themes of engagement.** These include new chapters on structured decision-making (**Pillar E**), engagement and cohesion (**Pillar I**), and ways of connecting with hard-to-reach groups (**Pillar J**). There are also two new chapters on digital (**Pillar L** and **Pillar M**), replacing the previous digital chapter. These look at the role of social media and at consulting using digital channels.

• **Updated and refreshed content, running across the rest of the guide.** In particular, there have been changes to **Foundation VII**, on evaluation.
Piloting this guide

There is no perfect council when it comes to engagement. Most authorities have elements they’re confident about and elements they are less sure of. Your council might be just starting out on the process of improving your engagement.

In recognition of this, the work feeding into the original New Conversations guide piloted different engagement approaches in four different authorities: Hackney, Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), Staffordshire, and Harlow. Each of these was aiming to move their engagement work in the right direction, from different starting positions.

The pilots were carried out specifically for this guide, and all four culminated in the creation of a practical guideline or tool.

Because they were delivered between spring 2016 and winter 2017, we have not included them in full in New Conversations 2.0. However, they remain invaluable resources for thinking about engagement.

All four can be found in the Asset Library. The specific pilots, and the resources developed around them, are listed below. You can access them by clicking the links.

- **Hackney** has a diverse and transient population. The council’s pilot was about taking the work they had already done to understand how residents felt about Hackney as a place, and using it to build rapport around tough issues. The work in Hackney used innovative engagement techniques to develop the borough’s direction on schooling.
  - Learn more about the Hackney Pilot in the Asset Library
  - Read *Achieving place leadership through engagement: a learning guide*, the final tool developed during the pilot

- **GMCA** is the authority for the Greater Manchester city-region. Their pilot was about the role of councillors and staff in engaging residents and communicating the core messages about devolution.
  - Learn more about the GMCA Pilot in the Asset Library
  - Read *The GMCA, our new elected Mayor and devolution: an information and resource pack for members*, the final tool developed during the pilot
  - Explore the suite of materials developed, to help councillors to engage around devolution in the area
• Staffordshire is a large county council. Its pilot was about using networks, assets and data to be a more responsive local authority. It also looked at how community-based engagement activities could help to develop quality insight which supported engagement.
  – Learn more about the Staffordshire Pilot in the Asset Library
  – Read Helping communities help themselves: a guide to action, the final tool developed during the pilot
• Harlow is a district council in Essex. Its story was about creating an organisational culture that was outward-focused and attuned to the needs of residents. This included work to deliver channel shift in a way that included residents and engaged with local issues.
  – Learn more about the Harlow Pilot in the Asset Library
  – Read Embedding community engagement through change: a three-phase checklist, the final tool developed during the pilot

If you would like to know more about any of these four pilot projects then email The Campaign Company, who supported the councils to carry out their engagement work, or call them on 0208 6880650.
What this guide is and what it covers

This is a guide for councillors and officers working to build a stronger dialogue between councils and residents. We use 'engagement' within the document to mean anything that creates a stronger two-way relationship between council and communities. This runs from formal consultation to more deliberative and informal listening exercises. It can include co-production, crowdsourcing, events and public meetings. The definitions of these terms and others are available by clicking on the Glossary for this guide. For a list of some of the key documents used when compiling new Conversations go to the Further Reading resource in the Asset Library.

A core argument of New Conversations is that through working to listen and respond better on a regular basis, councils can improve dialogue and relationships. The more authorities invest in creative types of positive engagement, the less likely relations are to sour.

The guide will be useful for people throughout local government, whether you want to improve statutory practices to avoid legal challenge, or engage in more creative ways. It provides advice on how to rebuild trust in relationships that have broken down, helping you and your council to become better at listening and responding to resident concerns.
How the guide works

The 22 short chapters in this guide cover the basics of consultation and engagement, as well as setting out how you can go beyond this, and use engagement techniques to save money and build long-term trust.

The two overall sections are as follows (you can click on one to go directly to it).

- **Section 1: Covering the basics**
  
  This section lays down seven foundations for getting consultation and engagement right – from early decision-making through to evaluation. It includes information about the Gunning Principles and other key aspects of statutorily consultation and best practice. It is a good starting point if you want to make sure your council is up to speed.

- **Section 2: Surpassing expectations**
  
  This section contains fifteen pillars which help engagement to go further and do more. Within this, there are three sub-sections, each of which contains five chapters:

  - **Trust in democracy**
  - **Trust in the community**
  - **Trust in the system**

  You can get to the three sub-sections by clicking on the tabs running down the right hand side. There are also links within the guide, which help you to move around more quickly. Coloured links like [this](#) take you to other places in the guide. Black links, like [this](#), take you to different parts of the Asset Library. Non-bold links, like [this](#), take you to other external sources.

  At the end of each of the 22 chapters are links out to useful tools, case studies, checklists etc from the Asset Library.
Which hat are you wearing?

People working across the local government sector have a role to play in creating a new conversation with residents. From staff and officers who regularly talk to the public, through to cabinet members and committee chairs.

New Conversations 2.0 aims to put everything you could possibly need to know about local government consultation and engagement in one place. However, different bits are more useful to different people, so the idea with this guide is that you can click in and out, choosing the bits that are most relevant to you. To start with, click below on which ‘hat’ you’re wearing when you’re reading this. That way we can flag which sections and chapters might be a good place to start.

• cabinet member or committee chair
• local councillor
• chief executive, or member of senior management team
• officer planning and delivering services
i) Cabinet member or committee chair

Whether you’re a council leader (or opposition leader), a cabinet member (or shadow member) a committee chair or mayor, engagement with the community is vital. It is what makes democracy function.

Only through dialogue with the community can councils develop policies that reflect residents’ needs, and turn a grand vision into something meaningful to everyday lives.

- The section after this one, The context for this guide, provides a useful approach for thinking about the importance of engagement.
- If you are looking for a fresh approach to engagement at your organisation, you may want to start with Foundation I: How good or bad are we at engagement.
- Section 2: Surpassing expectations looks at some of the more complex, long-term strategies for building relationships between the council and the resident base. From the point of view of a councillor with decision-making powers, Pillar O: Embedding engagement in the organisation may be useful. Pillar G: ‘Place’ and engagement, and Pillar O: Continuous engagement and relationship building also have big strategic implications.
ii) Local councillor

Engagement is at the heart of politics, whether you’re a newly elected frontline councillor, an opposition councillor or someone who juggles ward work with a cabinet role.

This guide provides a range of innovative and sophisticated engagement techniques so the conversations you’re having every day in your neighbourhood can inform the council’s broad strategy. That will help you to hear from groups beyond those who are already engaged, to represent your area better, and to reduce caseloads by anticipating issues before they arise.

- The section after this one, The context for this guide, provides a useful approach for thinking about the importance of engagement. Meanwhile, if you want to get a better understanding of the key, basic questions around consultation, decision-making and a council’s legal obligations, perhaps begin with Section 1: Covering the basics. See, in particular, Foundation IV, Foundation V and Foundation VI.

- Meanwhile, Section 2: Surpassing expectations is packed with ideas about more innovative types of engagement. Pillar B: The role of the councillor in engagement will be especially handy. And the Trust in the community subsection offers a whole range of techniques and ideas for engagement in your local area.
iii) Chief executive or member of the senior management team

Delivering outcomes in the present highly scrutinised climate is a significant challenge, as work to meet political priorities comes up against hard financial realities.

This guide argues that through a genuine, open dialogue with residents, local authorities can make their communities more cohesive, their organisations more economically efficient and their services better. Engagement is not something to do on top of the other things; it’s something that will make the others easier.

• If your council has already had to grapple with legal processes around decisions, or is being confronted with them for the first time, then go straight to ‘Section 1: Covering the basics’. In particular Foundation I, which helps assess how good your council’s engagement is, may be useful.

• If you’re interested in how you can become more of a “thinking organisation” in general then go straight to ‘Section 2: Surpassing expectations’. The five Pillars in Trust in the system, which are about how people interact with services are especially crucial.
iv) An officer planning and delivering services

Most council departments now need to be comfortable speaking and listening to residents. Employees at all levels are increasingly encouraged to identify solutions and engage with residents’ needs. Most teams and departments will need to be as engaged with the public as much as possible.

• Your professional role may involve changes that are controversial or subject to legal scrutiny. If so read ‘Section 1: Covering the basics’, which is about the basic principles of good engagement. Foundation IV: How do I make sure I stick to the law of consultation is especially vital here, as is the overview of best practice in Foundation VI.

• Section 2: Surpassing expectations, meanwhile, gives a whole array of tips and ideas. Which of these are most useful will depend on your specific role and policy directorate. There are chapters here on co-production (Pillar C), structured decision-making (Pillar E), social networks (Pillar F), hard-to-reach communities (Pillar J), personalisation (Pillar K), digital channels (Pillar M) and the role of frontline staff (Pillar N). These all play into engagement, and could make a big difference in your efforts to connect with residents around service decisions.
Other LGA resources

There are a number of other recent LGA resources, which can support and complement your engagement work. These include:

• LGA guidance on surveys and benchmarking
• #FutureComms: a set of resources to support innovation in local government communication
• LG Inform: a tool for providing local data for to help better understand the area you serve
• One Community: the LGA guide, in partnership with NALC, on engaging with town and parish councils

For more information and guidance, the Asset Library contains a Further Reading section, which you can access by clicking here.
A changing conversation – the context for this guide

“Power is leaching from the centre, even as the complexities of national and international challenges multiply…The digital age, globalisation and higher levels of education have equipped more people to become insurgents or to form single-issue pressure groups…Power is draining away from those in whom it is formally placed, but with no obvious substitute in sight. Power is fragmenting. But what is the true cost to democracy?” Will Hutton, The Guardian, 2013

As we approach the third decade of the 21st century, public organisations and institutions find themselves in a tricky position. The challenges they face are arguably as hard as they’ve been at any point in post-war history and yet the public has very low trust in Government and other institutions to get the decisions right.⁵

There have been a series of major blows to trust in the system, running back over the last ten or fifteen years (documented by TCC in this timeline). One of the most recent of these was the horrific Grenfell tragedy, which had a major impact on trust for local government.

These have made engagement both more difficult and more important. This is a national or even global problem, but one which local institutions can help solve. By creating meaningful conversations with residents, councils can ‘trust their way’ to a stronger relationship with those they serve. This guide aims to help boost that dialogue.

⁵ Edelman Trust Barometer 2019 – UK Findings, January 2019
‘Easy-answer’ politics

In the UK and some other parts of the world, there’s been a much-documented rise in the politics of easy answers. Some refer to this as ‘post-truth politics’ where emotive arguments trump rational ones. Others suggest democracy itself is in crisis.’ Either way, this could threaten rational debate and meaningful engagement (the resource outlining The Politics of Consultation, featured in the Asset Library, explains more).

The process has happened in line with falling levels of direct participation in politics, which may have actively contributed to the rise of ‘easy-answer’ approaches to decision-making. This has also coincided with a decline in deference to experts and establishment figures, as well as with rising access to information and to forums for discussion. This is reflected in social media, but also in steady increases in the use of mechanisms such as Freedom of Information requests and judicial reviews. Citizens are increasingly unwilling to place their faith in others to make decisions for them, or to be the obedient, passive recipients of policy.

The rise of digital, meanwhile, has increased forms of direct democracy. A 2017 report by Nesta described the accelerating speed at which digital technology is evolving, and the impact this is having on engagement:

“The last few years have seen a surge in digital democracy projects around the world. Parliaments are experimenting with new tools to enable citizens to propose and draft legislation, local governments are giving residents the power to decide how local budgets are spent, and a wave of new political parties such as Podemos, Pirate Parties and M5S have at their core the idea of participatory or direct democracy.”

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7 ‘What’s Gone Wrong with Democracy?’ The Economist, 2014
8 ‘Membership of UK political parties’, House of Commons library, 2016
9 ‘In an age of historically low party membership, party identification, voter volatility, rising abstentionism and greater individualism, mainstream parties are struggling to be representative.’ The Populist Signal, Claudia Chwalisz, 2015, p. xi-xii
10 ‘Trust the experts’, Demos, 2014
11 ‘Judicial review applications’, DataMarket
Forces such as this have generally increased the desire among residents for more participatory and democratic forms of decision-making, with the government releasing its Civil Society Strategy as a result. In London, for instance, there is a growing appetite for participatory budgeting, and high-profile debates around regeneration projects have created a wider discussion about the need for tenant ballots.

More immediately, it is worth noting the more immediate change that the debate around Brexit has created in the last two years. This has created more focus on cohesion and breakdowns of trust within communities, with the Government releasing its Integrated Communities strategy, and providing extra funding.

The debate about the Brexit negotiations themselves, meanwhile, has created significant discussion about public consultation and democratic decision-making. University College London’s Constitution Unit, for example, ran a Citizen’s Assembly on Brexit.

In this context, ‘easy-answer’ politics can be seen as the response of rising self-confidence, and frustration among communities who have not been trusted or given the tools to answer hard questions.

**Goodbye, ‘government-by-spreadsheet’**

The presumption some have is that, by improving services (by doing the same thing better) trust can be returned. There is some truth in this. Getting the basics right does make a difference. But the belief that service quality alone will solve things is a sort of ‘government-by-spreadsheet’ approach, which reflects the old way of making policy.

Government-by-spreadsheet isn’t all bad and it frequently delivers good outcomes. However, it often doesn’t lead to organisations listening, thinking or responding. Indeed, Demos describe how it can lead to a ‘performance paradox’:

> “Objective performance is not the only criterion that people use to evaluate government – expectations, perceptions and socio-economic factors all have an impact... These factors have led to a situation in the UK in which many people admit to having positive personal interactions with public services, but consider the public sector as a whole to be performing poorly – the so-called ‘performance paradox’ in which services improve, but satisfaction falls.”

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13 Civil Society Strategy: building a future that works for everyone, Cabinet Office, August 2018
14 Your money, your say: A Participatory Budget for London, Len Duval, February 2018
15 Proposed new funding condition to require resident ballots in estate regeneration Consultation Paper, Greater London Authority February 2018
16 Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper, MHCLG, March 2018
Service provision has frequently got better as a result of the service-focused approach. Yet due to the high-handed way this has been seen to be delivered, the government-by-spreadsheet ethos, has undermined many improvements in perception.

Moreover, because the initial bonds of trust were weak, public organisations were often not given the benefit of the doubt when there was pressure on service delivery. This is most obvious in the case of the significant fall in government funding since the financial crisis of 2008. Budget reductions have made it harder to meet people’s expectations about services. Citizens whose chief experience was in the ‘government-by-spreadsheet’ era often had neither trust in their council to make the hard choices, nor the opportunity to be able to contribute to decision-making themselves.

All politics is local

These flaws in ‘top-down’ models have been observed and alluded to by policy-makers from across the political spectrum. There’s a growing consensus from all sides that a dispersal of power away from ‘top-down’ approaches is vital and that many of the solutions must be local.

To be clear, this isn’t because councils are necessarily the place where problems with trust stem from. Although trust for local government isn’t always high, it is consistently higher than for national government. This gap has steadily grown and authorities are still held in higher esteem than many national institutions.

However, while the low level of public trust isn’t always a problem of local government’s making, it is within their power to solve. Councils are the form of authority with which residents most often have direct contact and they’re a big part of the solution to closing up the trust deficit.

Local authorities today have a unique opportunity: to win back trust on the front line, and to make huge savings through the capacity and cohesion that process can build.

18 IPPR, for example, talk in ‘Many to Many’ about the need for stronger citizen bonds, and the CSJ talk about social ‘breakdown’
19 Indeed, localism has been called, variously, the ‘antidote’ to public disaffection with experts (Damian Hind, Policy Exchange, 2016), and the key to the ‘restoration of trust in our political institutions’ (‘Trust in Practice’, Demos, 2010, p. 16)
20 Between 2001 and 2012, for instance, the gap in trust between local and national government effectively doubled in size, from 16 per cent to 31 per cent. Building Trust’ action plan, SOLACE and LGA, 2013
21 ‘Polling on resident satisfaction with councils’, LGA, October 2018
The courage to ‘trust first’

Anthony Seldon's 2009 book Trust starts with ten core arguments about trust. One of these is that “Government in Britain will gain trust if it promises less and…trusts more.”

The challenges we have described above mean public organisations are sometimes fearful to do that. Faced with public anger and apparent unwillingness to compromise, the instinct among some is to raise the drawbridge.

Yet, now is precisely the moment to trust first. This can be done by breaking away from process-driven consultation models, and fostering an ethos of strategic, continuous and meaningful engagement.

Most councils have a communications department and a consultation team. By joining up these speaking (communications) and listening (consultation) functions, local authorities can enable a sophisticated and long-running dialogue.

Letting this conversation have more of an influence in the council’s strategy can change how the council is seen and how it sees itself. It can lead to more day-to-day innovation from departments, rather than a reliance on data-driven planning or received wisdom. It can help a council to take a more proactive role within communities, instead of always being braced to defend itself against criticism.

Although one effect will be better relations at a broad level, helping to break the national trust deadlock shouldn’t be seen as ‘cleaning up someone else’s mess’. It’s actually an area where short-term spending can bring immense long-term value for a council and its residents.

Evolving conversation

Good engagement can create social connections between individuals and groups. It can enhance the motivation and capacity to participate in decision-making, and it can bolster economic efficiency and resident choice. It fosters a more open relationship with residents, saving time that might otherwise have been spent fighting long-running battles. It generates capacity in the community, by building on assets, networks and local identity. It also helps residents to understand and access the system more easily.

By being at the forefront of relationships between citizen and state, local government can lead the way to a more grown-up relationship; one which is constructive and responsive, and which authorities ultimately benefit from too.

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22 Trust: How we lost it and how to get it back, Anthony Seldon, 2009
Section 1: Covering the basics

The scrutiny paid to decision-making has increased a lot in recent years. Greater demands for transparency have meant legal challenge and investigations of due process are now commonplace.\(^23\)

Added to this is a rise in the public’s ability to cross-examine, share and interrogate information, thanks to the internet, the media and Freedom of Information legislation.

Councils have adapted at different speeds. Everyone is under pressure: for some councillors and officers, engagement still feels like something that would be beneficial but not essential. Moreover, ‘engagement’ can seem like a vague concept because it covers so much.

The aim of this section is to provide the basics. It consists of seven foundations which provide the basis for good consultation and engagement. Each of these will help you assess what level your council is at, and provide core principles and relevant context. Taken together, the section will explain how to evaluate engagement, decide what type of engagement is required, and avoid things going wrong.

The seven foundations are:

- **Foundation I:** How good or bad are we at engagement?
- **Foundation II:** Should I engage, consult, or do something else?
- **Foundation III:** How do I decide which medium and channels to use?
- **Foundation IV:** How do I make sure I stick to the law of consultation?
- **Foundation V:** What pre-emptive steps should I take to avoid running into trouble?
- **Foundation VI:** How can I follow good practice?
- **Foundation VII:** How should I evaluate my engagement work?

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\(^{23}\) In 1970, for example, there were 396 judicial reviews yet by 2010 there were 2,426. See Simon Rogers (citing Christopher Hood and Ruth Dixon), Datamarket
Foundation I: How good or bad are we at engagement?

“The consultation on local government has been a lost opportunity, and a waste of time. The county council approach remains top down. We need to turn decision-making on its head.” Council leader, following a 0.3 per cent response to a consultation on local services

One of the first things to know when thinking about engagement is how your organisation is currently doing. Ultimately, engagement is about creating dialogue. The two sides of this dialogue, residents and the council, pose different challenges. To know what you’re working with, you need to understand both. Below are three areas of questioning to frame your inquiry.

1. What views do residents have of the council? Do you have sufficient insight to understand how they see engagement? How will they respond when you talk to them?

2. What do your officers and councillors think of engagement? Is there a shared view of its importance and how it should be done?


When it comes to the balance between engagement among residents and at the council, any combination is possible. You may have self-motivated and engaged residents but an authority that remains top-down and inward-looking. You might have an eager and outward-looking council but an apathetic population with low capacity to do things for themselves.

Councillors writing for the New Local Government Network (NLGN) have come up with a scale for mapping this, charting how open or closed the council is in its outlook, and how engaged or apathetic the community is. See the chart for understanding this below.
To understand residents, you need to dig deeper into the dynamics at work in the population. Some of the basic data your council already has will be fairly instructive here. For example, what are the demographics of your borough? How diverse is the area? How transient is the population? How equal is the area and how much cohesion is there between different groups? What are education levels like? Is the area economically fairly equal, or do rich and poor live alongside each other?
Beyond this, there are insights around people’s willingness to engage and the likelihood of them stepping up. What are attitudes towards the council? Are levels of satisfaction and trust high or low? Are there problems of cynicism or alienation, indicated by high antisocial behaviour levels, or low levels of participation in community activity and local elections? What levels of participation have previous consultations received? You might already be tracking some of this information internally, but if not there are ways of building it into satisfaction surveys. You can ask simple things, like how well respondents feel local people get on with each other.

**Pillar O** gives more ideas on surveying trust and satisfaction. On the specific question of trust, meanwhile, there are two further tests, which can be found in the Asset Library: ‘[Testing trust](#)’ and ‘[Satisfaction hard won](#)’. These give further ideas for gathering insight and understanding the engagement challenges your area is likely to face.

Next, you’ll need to get a sense of how good you presently are at engaging. The scope of roles related to engagement will differ depending on the structure of your organisation.

Things to investigate include attitudes to engagement within the council. Has it traditionally gone well and impacted on decisions or has there been a culture of tokenism? There are also more technical questions around processes and how learning has traditionally been managed. For example, who is formally responsible for consultation, and are evaluations of previous consultations stored in a single place and fed back to the whole organisation?

This process doesn’t have to be overly bureaucratic but it does have to provide you with the means to step outside your routine and critically evaluate processes and culture that have become routine or habitual. This can be done via internal surveys and interviews, or data reviews and reference to good practice. At the end of the process, you should be able to tell the story of how the authority engages – even if only in ‘elevator pitch’ form, or as a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis. – You will then be able to make judgements about where improvement is needed.

Once you have clearly examined the resident and council sides of the engagement equation, you’re ready to consider the next steps in this guide.

**Resources in the Asset Library:**

- Test: [What type of council are you?](#)
- Test: [Testing trust](#)
- Test: [Satisfaction hard won](#)
Foundation II: Should I engage, consult, or do something else?

“Often the word ‘consultation’ is used when what is meant is ‘information’, and scenarios are not put forward. The public are not stupid. They need to know what happens here if they choose this option and what happens there if they choose that option.” Simon Hoare MP

First and foremost, when thinking about engaging around a specific issue, you need to be clear on the difference between engagement and consultation.

Sometimes other listening events, forms of co-production, types of participation, or information drives, get labelled as ‘consultation’ when they shouldn’t be. This is very risky. From the outset you need to be clear that consultation is a specific and concrete term, and ‘engagement’ is a much broader and more varied one.

So, before going any further, be clear on whether it’s more appropriate to engage, consult or do something else. A good definition of consultation is as follows:

“The dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action.”  

Engagement is looser. It’s about encouraging productive relationships between communities and public bodies.

“Developing and sustaining a working relationship between one or more public body and one or more community group, to help them both to understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences.”

Consultation will also have a clear beginning, middle and end. It might be part of an ongoing, continuous period of engagement, but it is a process. Its remit should be finite and the scope for stakeholder input should be clear.

24 Elected Member Briefing Note, Improvement Service and TCI, 2013
25 National Standards for Community Engagement, Scottish Community Development Centre
Engagement, meanwhile, is broader. At times, it will be about working with the community to design campaigns or interventions or about asking for action and involvement. At other points it will mean seeking insight into what local people think and feel. It increasingly involves using digital technologies, and seeks to make services more responsive to residents’ needs.

The ‘do I need to consult?’ tool in the Asset Library, is useful for working out what you need to do.

Generally speaking, engagement provides the more positive experience for stakeholders. It gives them a greater opportunity to see the productive impact they’ve had. It builds the community’s confidence in the council, and offers insight for the council into the community. At times this might be less true, such as when there’s a piece of bad news to be broken – about which residents have no choice. This too is a type of engagement, and one that needs to be honest, transparent, and open in dealing with queries.

Unless there’s scope for consultees to influence a decision, then it shouldn’t be called a consultation. It might be an information exercise or the co-production of an improvement to a service or a series of listening events. However, it is not a consultation.

You must make it clear to stakeholders what they can influence and, more importantly, what they can’t. Pillar A looks in more detail at how you do the groundwork so that you’re clear from the start about the scope and limits of the engagement process.

It’s of paramount importance that terminology is correct and that you stick to the process you agree throughout the process (even if you are going beyond statutory requirements). If you say you are going to consult and involve you must be consistent in adhering to that process and those principles. You need to be sure you have the capacity and political commitment to see your agreed approach through to the end. If you change mid way through you can be open to challenge. As the story of ‘R (ex parte Bokrosova) v Lambeth 2015’ demonstrates, getting this wrong can lead to cynicism and disenchantment and the consequences could include damage to credibility or legal threat.

The terminology was codified in 1969 by Sherry Arnstein in her ‘ladder of citizen participation’. The Consultation Institute has sought to rationalise and update its use and has set out the four essential parts.

- **information-giving**: where residents are informed, but have no influence
- **consultation**: where residents can inform decisions, but don’t have the final say

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26 ‘A Ladder of Citizen Participation’, Sherry R Arnstein, 1969
*co-production*: where things are done jointly, acting together

*supporting citizen power*: where residents lead and the council stands back

It is worth noting that the Consultation Institute takes issue with Arnstein's point of view that participation is intrinsically flawed if it does not result in transfer of power to communities. Of course, citizens will ideally take more and more responsibility. Pillar D and Pillar H respectively look at co-production and the enablement of ‘citizen power’ in more detail. But councils need to be realistic – sometimes you need to inform or consult in the traditional senses.

In deciding what level to engage at, you need to be aware that stakeholders’ interest will vary, depending on how important an issue is. Are people happy just to be kept informed or do they want to be involved?

Identifying stakeholders and their level of interest and influence can be simplified by stakeholder mapping. This tool, which features under Foundation III, will help you to prioritise and choose the right level of dialogue for each group. Foundation III also includes more on how to choose the right platforms, mediums and channels for engagement. This way you can avoid engaging too little on burning issues, or too much on questions people don't care about.

Pitching this right is vital, and this is where pre-engagement comes in. We’ll look at this at the start of Section 2: Surpassing expectations, but it’s basically about working out, through initial conversations with stakeholders, how broad your parameters are and how much scope there is. Ideally, you should aim for continuous engagement with stakeholders and communities, to build trust on both sides. This will mean that if you do need to actively consult, your stakeholders are informed and you have a good basis for participation.

**Resources in the Asset Library:**

> Test: Do I need to consult?

> Story: ‘R (ex parte Bokrosova) v Lambeth 2015’ – a study in the importance of labelling consultation correctly

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Arnstein’s Ladder versus the Gunning Principles – TCI September 2016
Foundation III: How do I decide which medium and channels to use?

“The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it because it is good for you.” Sherry Arnstein, Author 1969

The ultimate goal is that engagement becomes second nature. In this ideal world, decisions will less frequently reach the point of formal consultations over unpopular decisions, because engagement will be happening all the time, and council and community will be in tune with each other.

There will still be many occasions when specific engagement is required or a particular issue needs resident input. ‘How best to address engagement on issue X?’ you’ll need to ask. This instantly raises nuts and bolts questions, such as whether to commission a listening exercise or design an event; whether to do something face-to-face or set up an online questionnaire.

A huge element of this is about speaking to hard-to-reach groups or disengaged stakeholders. Often there will be stakeholders who need to be asked but who aren’t IT literate enough to participate in an e-consultation, or physically mobile enough to come to a town hall event. Putting your consultation online and waiting for a queue to form at the town hall won’t cut it, and legal challenges have come about in the past because councils have bypassed stakeholder groups in this way. The ‘How to choose’ and ‘Stakeholder mapping model’ tools, which feature, offer ways to get your process right so you don’t miss key groups. The information about social networks in Pillar F gives more insight on how council channels can reach further into the community.

Some things are fairly obvious. For a survey of older residents, a digitised consultation may bypass a large section of your target group. Other aspects are subtler. If an issue is controversial or emotionally charged, for example, group events or ‘town hall’-style Q&As may be the wrong approach. They could lead to quieter voices or minority opinions being drowned out.

To get it right, you’ll first need a thorough analysis and understanding of the context. The more clarity on this, the better. There are four key questions to ask:

28 See ‘A dangerous and promising path’, Blake L. Jones, University of Kentucky College of Social Work
1. what is the objective of the engagement?
2. who are the stakeholders and what are their needs?
3. what stage of the decision-making process are we at?
4. what resources and limitations apply?29

This analysis should give you a good appreciation of what is required from the engagement exercise, before you begin deciding on which methods to use.

Your will have a clear view of your stakeholders and their abilities, allowing you to design and develop activities that don’t exclude or create barriers for sections of the community. If the project is already at an advanced stage, you can then make choices about how you communicate the role engagement is playing. Do you need information, for example, or policy ideas? Is there a specific ask or proposal you’re looking to road-test?

You’ll often find that a uniform approach to this process is not appropriate. A set of focus groups and a survey may be right for project X, but for a variety of reasons may be inappropriate for project Y.

Once you have that analysis your aim should be to create multiple channels to reflect the particular demands of your engagement. You’re legally obliged, when consulting, to use a diverse range of channels which are suitable to the context. Decisions have been taken to judicial review in the past precisely because a council chose only a single channel, such as consulting online. (See ‘Draper Versus Lincolnshire County Council’, which is part of a longer list of key judicial review cases in the Asset Library).

For example, a piece of engagement around regeneration may need to cater for residents on an estate who have concerns about changes and anxieties about upheaval. Choosing a personalised format, using familiar and convenient channels, will be vital to making sure this potential sense of turmoil isn’t exacerbated. As part of the same process, however, you may have business interests and community groups that need an overview of potential impacts and opportunities. The method of engagement and the tone of communications for this second set of stakeholders will be different.

29 ‘Community Planning Toolkit’, Big Lottery Fund, Community Places, 2014
Knowing your audience (see *Foundation I*) will be a significant help to getting tone and format right. You need a variety of dialogue methods so you can involve a high proportion of stakeholders. This should be a mix of quantitative (feedback forms/surveys) and qualitative (focus groups/deliberative events/exhibitions/roadshows/vox pops etc).

Based on your analysis there is a body of practice which you can apply. There are many examples of different and creative ways of engaging. These include community narratives research, community forums, online discussion areas, consensus-building exercises, and visioning exercises. Go to the **Glossary button** to find out more about what these are. Any or all of these may be right for your engagement, but only by thinking through what you are aiming to achieve can you tell if they are.

**Resources in the Asset Library:**

- Test: [How to choose the right level of engagement](#)
- Tool: [How to map stakeholders](#)
- Tool: [What types of engagement to use to promote dialogue](#)

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30 'Community Planning Toolkit', Big Lottery Fund, Community Places and National Lottery, 2014
Foundation IV: How do I make sure I stick to the law of consultation?

“I fought the law and the law won.” The Clash

We have discussed the legal and regulatory framework for consultation and engagement in Foundation Two. Most consultations, even highly contested ones, do not end up in the courts as disputes and challenges are resolved by other means. The ultimate recourse for those who feel they have been unfairly served is judicial review. This is the legal instrument in place as a check to make sure public bodies carry out their duties fairly.

There are many judicial review precedents that are relevant to consultation and engagement. For example, the case of R (ex parte LH) v Shropshire County Council made clear for future consultations that where a closure of a service is proposed, specific proposals must be consulted on. The case of R (ex parte the Partingdale Lane Residents Association) v London Borough of Barnet, meanwhile, made clear that emails showing that a decision has already been made could be used as evidence.

We’ve already touched briefly on judicial review in earlier parts of this guide. This Foundation considers in more detail how to avoid it, and ensure compliance with the law.

A consultation can be challenged if it’s unfair, if the process was flawed or the consultation gave rise to misleading expectations. Anyone with ‘standing’ in relation to a decision from a consultation – i.e. anyone who experiences its impact – is entitled to bring a complaint.

There are clear rules about when you need to formally consult. These include when there’s a legal requirement, when you’ve promised to do so, and when the legal rights of particular groups are affected. In the lead-up to any consultation you’ll have had some level of engagement with stakeholders, and may even have done some co-production (Pillar D has more about what co-production is). Be mindful that lines can blur; if you’re not careful, your engagement can quickly become a full consultation with binding legislation. We’ve already looked, in Foundation II, at the situations where you do and don’t need to consult.

Another point to note is that when a judicial review challenge is upheld, it’s not about the subject of consultation, it is always about the process of consultation. (Click for a map of what the judicial review process looks like). So, the procedure must be absolutely watertight. Complaints can sometimes be managed by taking steps like extending the consultation.
There is also specific legislation that needs to be taken account of, including the Local Government Act 1999, the Health & Social Care Act 2012 and the Equalities Act 2010.

Once a judicial review has been raised and the case goes to court there is a set of rules that a Judge will use to determine whether the consultation is lawful. These are known as the four Gunning Principles, and it’s important to always keep them in mind. In simple terms they dictate that consultation:

1. must happen before the decision is made
2. must give sufficient context and information
3. should provide enough time for people to think things over
4. should demonstrate real deliberation and thought over the results

For example, consulting only online would be prohibited by the second Gunning Principle. Pillar M looks at the role of digital technologies in consultation, and the rules around it.

While the Gunning Principles offer a legal precedent, there are broader guidelines for good consultation and engagement, which are updated by the Government each year. While they’re not legally binding (and are slightly more geared to central government use), it’s important to keep them in mind, as they play an important role as a further round of checks.

With shrinking budgets, councils can’t afford the expense of getting the legal aspects of consultation and engagement wrong. Court cases are expensive, and the media firefighting and reputational damage that comes with a legal challenge bring their own costs.

Two of the most important Resources in the Asset Library, the Gunning Principles and What is Judicial Review, are also replicated in the main guide, below, because they are so important. There are also two other useful tools:

> Knowledge: Where others went wrong – a list of key Judicial Review test cases to be aware of
> Tool: The Judge Over Your Shoulder flowchart for Judicial Review
Rules: The Gunning Principles

They were coined by Stephen Sedley QC in a court case in 1985 relating to a school closure consultation (R v London Borough of Brent ex parte Gunning). Prior to this, very little consideration had been given to the laws of consultation. Sedley defined that a consultation is only legitimate when these four principles are met:

1. **proposals are still at a formative stage**
   A final decision has not yet been made, or predetermined, by the decision makers

2. **there is sufficient information to give ‘intelligent consideration’**
   The information provided must relate to the consultation and must be available, accessible, and easily interpretable for consultees to provide an informed response

3. **there is adequate time for consideration and response**
   There must be sufficient opportunity for consultees to participate in the consultation. There is no set timeframe for consultation, although the length of time given for consultee to respond can vary depending on the subject and extent of impact of the consultation

4. **‘conscientious consideration’ must be given to the consultation responses before a decision is made**
   Decision-makers should be able to provide evidence that they took consultation responses into account

These principles were reinforced in 2001 in the ‘Coughlan Case (R v North and East Devon Health Authority ex parte Coughlan)’, which involved a health authority closure and confirmed that they applied to all consultations, and then in a Supreme Court case in 2014 (R ex parte Moseley v LB Haringey), which endorsed the legal standing of the four principles. Since then, the Gunning Principles have formed a strong legal foundation from which the legitimacy of public consultations is assessed, and are frequently referred to as a legal basis for judicial review decisions.

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31 In some local authorities, their local voluntary Compact agreement with the third sector may specify the length of time they are required to consult for. However, in many cases, the Compact is either inactive or has been cancelled so the consultation timeframe is open to debate


33 BAILII, United Kingdom Supreme Court, Accessed: 13 December 2016

34 The information used to produce this document has been taken from the Law of Consultation training course provided by The Consultation Institute
Knowledge: What is judicial review?

Understanding what the law says, and that there are actions you need to take to ensure you’re acting within it, is vital in avoiding costly court battles.

What is judicial review?

As public bodies, local authorities make thousands of public-facing decisions. Each one has the potential to impact on individuals and groups. Judicial review is there to give the public the chance to challenge the council’s use of its administrative powers. Where there is a claim against a decision in the public realm, a case may be heard by the courts.

The courts’ scope is limited and supervisory. Often the court is looking at the procedural basis of decisions and making judgements about adherence to legal procedures as set down by Parliament. As such, your decisions will be at risk if you have not followed the laws that cover the decision-making function that you are exercising. These might be contained in any number of Government legislative acts such as The Local Government Act 2003 or The Childcare Act 2006. It is important to be on top of the legislation that is relevant to the work you are undertaking.

How does it impact on engagement?

Engagement tends to be part of a wider process of change in which decisions that impact on people will be made. You may be engaging residents on the potential of co-delivering cultural services with residents’ groups. Some elements of the decision-making process, where they relate to statutory services such as libraries, demand a formal consultation. The consultation element of that decision is a recognised legal process and you need to adhere not only to the law that covers library provision but also the procedural law on consultation. The legal standards most often quoted in relation to consultation are the Gunning Principles and Legitimate Expectations.

For a fuller explanation of judicial review, read the Government’s Judge Over Your Shoulder document.
Foundation V: What pre-emptive steps should I take to avoid running into trouble?

Engagement is about involving people in democracy but it can open you up to criticism, unforeseen consequences and people with their own agendas. It also exposes the depth of your thinking, the strength of your communication channels and the level of trust within your community.

As a result, things rarely run smoothly. We live in the era of social media and instantaneous, open communications. A campaign opposing a change or attacking a decision can spring up overnight. In the worst-case scenario this can end up in court, or with a breakdown in relations so deep that trust is permanently damaged.

However, you can take pre-emptive steps to reduce the risks attached to consultation and engagement. You can maintain good relations with local people and even turn problems to your advantage. The Thamesmead case study is a good example of this.

There are two parts to consider: relations with the council, and cooperation within the authority.

In local communities

You can never eliminate the risk of a public challenge entirely but being prepared can help you to put in place measures to mitigate the likelihood of it happening and minimise the impact if it does.

A big part of this is understanding the anxieties of the community affected and providing the key information as early as possible. Imagine an open and inclusive engagement process on a potential estate regeneration. If your community is not ready to take part in co-creating the project, then you may end up with deep concern and fear about what's next.

Getting your messaging wrong can exacerbate problems and create new ones, especially if you reveal information too early, or all in one go. As with any strategy, the starting point is to imagine how residents might respond to proposals. You need to be as prepared as possible for the questions and responses that arise.
You’re much less likely to be taken by surprise if you are able to draw on ongoing engagement processes that let you softly test new concepts, identifying resistance as you go. For example, at a local resident meeting about a different topic, you might talk to people informally about other decisions on the horizon. Local councillors have a big role to play here, because they engage with local people every day. They know their wards, and will have a strong idea of how receptive locals are likely to be to a particular change. (See Pillar B, which looks at the councillor role.

Knowing your community, in terms of mood and feeling as well as facts and figures, is extremely important. It means issues are less likely to emerge in the first place because you’ll be responding to people’s needs in everything you do. It also means that if issues do arise you can develop responses that mean something to people. It also helps if you have established relationships and know how to contact the key community leaders. This will help you to reach out and ensure that your engagement doesn’t end up leaving a disgruntled minority in its wake.

Within the council

Absolutely key to this is being internally clear about who is managing the overall strategy. It is vital that someone has a clear project leadership role with appropriate authority. This isn’t something that can typically be done through a committee approach but everyone needs to understand what others are doing and why.

Budget constraints in recent years compound all of this, meaning decisions on reducing services and cutting spending are now commonplace. The threat of Judicial Review is one which many campaign organisations use to slow down decisions. There will be many council teams who have little experience of delivering a legally robust engagement process. Departments like planning are more experienced in this field, and can teach others.

Another part of the challenge is that most senior council officers only encounter the pitfalls of getting engagement or consultation wrong once they’ve fallen into them. Training from and discussion with other councils or departments within your own council should ensure that senior management involves legal teams earlier in the strategy phase. It’s better to put protections in place than add them in later. Ideally, this will be linked to a much wider engagement strategy, which goes beyond statutory consultation. If learning from across the council is brought on board from the start, then problems can be pre-empted with far greater ease.

Resources in the Asset Library:

> Story: Thamesmead Case study – forging strong links with the community
Foundation VI: How can I follow good practice?

“What have the Church of England and local government got in common? If they don’t keep up with the times, both could become an irrelevance to the daily lives of our citizens.” Paul Scriven, former Leader of Sheffield City Council

The previous Foundations have looked at the legalities of consultation, and how to pre-empt problems, but what does truly excellent consultation look like and how can you know you’ve done well?

The Consultation Institute’s charter outlines seven elements of best practice:

• integrity
• visibility
• accessibility
• transparency
• disclosure
• fairness
• publication

These are explained in more detail below. They’re the gold standard of a good consultation process, and they apply to other types of engagement too. The charter can act as a guiding set of benchmarks against which to measure the quality of your engagement.
It’s also important that your engagement follows a process of best practice. The route-map to good consultation tool shows, through a simple ‘before, during and after’ model, what a well-executed procedure looks like. The basic stages are as follows:

**Before**

- a. decide key questions
- b. decide stakeholders
- c. what’s come before?
- d. decide resources and timescales?

**During**

- e. choose consultation methods
- f. write communications plan
- g. design and implement

**After**

- h. analyse and interpret
- i. provide feedback
- j. evaluate
Finally, there are a number of shifts taking place in how councils operate which it will be useful to bear in mind when planning any engagement process. Your council will likely be focusing on many of them already.

- **Efficiency and value-for-money**
  Every council in the country is coming up against pressure on budgets. Consultations or engagement processes will need to respond to this. Engagement needs to first find learning that prevents waste (for example, money being spent on a service people don’t want). Secondly it will need to be economically efficient in and of itself (for instance, by keeping things ‘in house’ where possible).

- **A local focus**
  Increasingly, more powers and responsibilities are devolved in certain areas. Some councils have successfully negotiated devolution deals and it is important to consider how to engage local communities in these plans. Will residents be concerned that different arrangements, will lead to more distant and less responsive relationships with their local authorities? Our GMCA case study demonstrates how this is being tackled in Greater Manchester. Similarly, consider solutions which give power to local organisations like residents’ groups or parish and town councils. See **Pillar G** for more on localism and place. Within **Pillar H** there is some information about how methods like ‘parishing’ work, and some guidance on ‘double devolution’ – the process where more power is given to small councils.

- **Integration**
  Most councils are now keen to integrate their services with other public services to achieve better outcomes for people who use these services. The more your engagement process can build cooperation between council and other public services, the more effective they’ll be.

- **Political change**
  A number of district councils are exploring moves to join in one single entity. This will mean a local authority with wider geographical horizon and it may ultimately lead to fewer local councillors. Within this, engagement is vital to retain and enhance perceptions of good representation. See **Pillar K**, which looks at personalisation and engagement.

- **Digital**
  The digital agenda is the revolution of our age. How it’s used defines best practice in councils today and in the future. Without a relevant digital presence, your engagement may marginalise growing numbers of the population. But you should not rely on digital so much that you exclude others. See **Pillar L**, which looks more at digital and engagement.
As well as fulfilling most of the expectations around consultation best practice consideration of these issues will help keep your engagement aligned as a valuable asset in achieving your wider objectives.

One of the most important Resources in the Asset Library, the TCI Charter, is also replicated in the main guide, below, because it is especially important. There are also other useful tools, including:

> Tool: A routemap to good consultation
Rules: ‘The TCI charter’

The Consultation Institute provides a charter, which outlines seven key aspects of good consultation.

1. **Integrity**: Intentions must be honest, and with a genuine willingness to listen and be influenced
2. **Visibility**: There should be a real effort to make all of those who have a right to participate aware of what’s going on
3. **Accessibility**: There needs to be reasonable access, using appropriate methods and channels and catering for hard-to-reach groups
4. **Transparency**: Things submitted need to be made public and data disclosed, unless there’s a specific reason to make them exempt
5. **Disclosure**: All relevant material and context should be disclosed by the council, and in return residents should disclose the full range of local opinion
6. **Fairness**: Assessments and interpretations of consultations need to be objective. Decisions need to be representative of the spread of opinion
7. **Publication**: Participants have a right to receive feedback on the final output, and on the eventual outcome of the process

Before, during and after a consultation process, these seven components should be things you abide by, steering your decision processes and marking good practice. Subsequently these can act as a checklist for assessing the quality of your consultation. They can also act as a guide for other forms of engagement.
Foundation VII: How should I evaluate my engagement work?

Good evaluation tells you what went well and what didn't. It highlights areas for improvement and how to achieve better value-for-money in future engagement work. If the engagement process can be proved to have been effective, then this justifies the expenditure of money and other resources.

Feeding back on the evaluation as thoroughly as possible, meanwhile, is important so that those involved know the outcome of the consultation.

Because of this, evaluation should be thought about at the beginning rather than left until the end of the consultation or engagement process. If it isn’t allocated time and resources from the start, it can end up uncosted and overlooked.

However, the arguments for evaluating consultation and engagement go far beyond this sort of cost-benefit analysis. Evaluation is the means by which you make the case for engagement. Only by consistently demonstrating the social, strategic and economic value of consultation can the sort of culture change which is often necessary be delivered.

In this respect, evaluation represents not the last but the first stage of engagement. It is the means by which consultation replenishes and justifies itself, and the route to more democratic forms of decision-making at every level.

In this context, think early on about whether to outsource for your evaluation or to keep it in-house. This will be influenced by the nature of the project. On the one hand, it could be important to achieve external legitimacy, especially if public perception of your organisation has not been good historically. On the other, if the objective is internal learning then it might be useful to keep it in-house. Whichever route you take, decide early on and stick to your choice.
There are three key elements to good evaluation, set out in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internal (looking at in-house data)</th>
<th>External (speaking to the public)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Return-on-investment</strong></td>
<td>• money spent on engaging versus money saved through outcomes</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• deduced using council figures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• see <a href="#">Cost-benefit calculator</a> tool</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• looking at efficiency of engagement process itself. i.e. was as much as possible kept in-house?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Process</strong></td>
<td>• paper evaluation, testing the process as against best practice</td>
<td>• testing reach of the engagement itself: visibility, message takeout etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• use in-house materials to test the process you followed against best practice</td>
<td>• small samples of those involved:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• did they feel informed, included, listened to? Which activities worked?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• small samples of those who should have been involved (i.e. hard-to-reach but impacted); did they hear about the consultation? How informed are they about the outcomes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Impact and outcomes</strong></td>
<td>• difference made thanks to consultation or engagement. eg were you able to discount particular options? Evidence found that makes one option stand out against the others?</td>
<td>• testing understanding of the issues and content consulted on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• outcomes for the authority: decisions made, savings generated, changes that will now happen</td>
<td>• small samples of those involved – do they know about the issue better now? Have their views on it changed? Satisfaction with changes?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because they involve gauging long-term impact, some of the external elements of the above table will need to wait until several months after the consultation. For example, assessing whether people feel informed about the final decision cannot be done the day after a consultation finishes.

This provides an important opportunity to catch up with residents after the formal engagement process has come to an end. Done well, it can encourage relationships to take root and become lasting and permanent.

Beyond this guide there are many useful resources to support strong engagement. These include ‘Making a Difference’, by the Department of Constitutional Affairs, and this set of guidelines, produced by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, in 2011. There is also good advice from the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement.

This feeds into the final point to make here, which is about having a long-term goal of continuous and ongoing engagement.

Indeed, because so many of the outcomes sought by engagement are intangible (improved relationships, changed perspectives, etc), the evidence by which you can measure success is often contextual, subjective or invisible in the short term. So, while statutory engagement exercises must always be evaluated afterwards on the basis of the economic and decision-making impact that flows from them, they shouldn’t be seen as a substitute for the longer-term measurements of trust and outlook.

Really great engagement strategies will ultimately go beyond discrete evaluations. They’ll put more and more emphasis on this kind of continuous engagement, serving the dual purpose of generating, ongoing feedback and enabling more regular contact with residents. Pillar O looks at this in much more detail.

Resources in the Asset Library:

> Tool: A cost-benefit calculator for engagement
> Knowledge: Useful guidance on evaluation
> Tool: Evaluation and SROI NEW
Section 2: Surpassing expectations

Engagement is now central to how councils operate. Gone are the days of press release blasts and tick-box consultations. Local authorities of the future will need to knit together their speaking and listening functions, to build real trust and understanding.

This is especially true in an era of falling budgets, rising expectations and low trust in national politicians. A cocktail of different factors – economic changes, cohesion issues, social media, globalisation, and increasingly curious and non-deferential citizens – means that councils must have real, honest conversations with residents.

Whereas the previous section looked at the fundamentals of getting engagement right, this one looks at how to go beyond that and be truly innovative. It consists of 15 pillars. We call these pillars because, whereas the guidance in Section 1 was all about the core basics, the advice in this section explains how you can build up from the foundations, and support engagement.

Doing this well will not be a frill or an add-on. It’s a way of being a council that trusts residents and is trusted in return, saving money and time in the process. There are three big benefits to this:

• More trust in democracy means citizens play a part in decisions. They develop a more ‘mutual’ relationship with the council, instead of being passive recipients.

• More trust in the community means different groups trust the council more to distribute resources and reflect their needs, building trust within the community.

• More trust in the system means people interact with the council on a day-to-day basis and so understand how services work and trust the council to function.
The diagram to the right gives an illustration of how these three elements of trust relate to each other. The first five pillars in this section are about creating ‘Trust in democracy’. The next five look at ways engagement can help build ‘Trust in the community’. The final five look at how engagement can bring about more ‘Trust in the system’.35

The ‘Trust in democracy’ section is immediately below. Or you can skip straight to ‘Trust in the community’ or ‘Trust in the system’.

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35 This was generated for this document. Originally it builds loosely on sociologist Barbara Misztal’s work on the benefits of trust, as outlined in The State of Trust, Demos, 2008, p.15-16
Section 2.1: Trust in democracy

This section is about how engagement can help democracy function better.

Most councils are moving away from a top down model, one which can make residents feel that decision-making happens far removed from them or their community. In a top-down model consultations may feel to residents to be a tick box activity unlikely to result in solutions influenced by their contribution.

This can lead to alienation and disillusionment, making policy changes difficult and meaning that people don’t understand the wider context in which a council’s choices are made.

Good engagement can provide a way of changing this bad feeling and lack of understanding, helping create real partnership and allowing residents to be informed contributors to decision-making.

The following five pillars should help you deliver this.

- **Pillar A**: Clarifying the choices on offer
- **Pillar B**: The role of the councillor in engagement
- **Pillar C**: Embedding engagement in the organisation
- **Pillar D**: Co-production and partnerships
- **Pillar E**: Structured decision-making about budgets and planning
Pillar A: Clarifying the choices on offer

“You can’t always get what you want.” Mick Jagger

It goes without saying that a good engagement or consultation process is better for public trust than no engagement or consultation process. However, engagement processes or consultations done badly – where outcomes are predestined or choices are false – are arguably worse for trust than either.

The Gunning Principles are all about preventing insincere or inauthentic consultation. We’ve already looked, in Foundation IV, at how you can make things legally watertight in that regard. This pillar is about how you can make your engagement truly and legally authentic.

Failure to do this may be something your council has encountered in the past. You might have asked a question that was too open, and got a response that simply wasn't doable. Or you might have asked a question which was too narrow and faced accusations of a ‘tick-box’ exercise.

The key to moving away from this type of scenario lies in ‘pre-engagement’. This means thinking through, at the outset, what the real scope for change can be and then giving communities as much freedom as possible within that.

1. Decide the parameters of your engagement through ‘pre-engagement’. Be brave and clear about what they are and why.

2. Believe in, and commit to a decision-making process which, within these parameters, genuinely responds to the views of residents. In other words, be as open as you can to new ideas, within the constraints of what you know is doable.

To put it another way, this is about deciding what’s on the menu: what dishes can feasibly be prepared, and what ingredients sourced – and then allowing the community as much input as possible in what they eventually choose.
In practical terms, pre-engagement means first involving stakeholders and colleagues who really understand the subject matter, so they can decide what the realistic choice is. If you’re running a participatory budget session, for example, then you need to first get a clear steer from your finance team about exactly how much wiggle room exists. Keeping the budget as it is will clearly not be an option, so allowing residents to input on whether to accept any cuts would be a mistake. However, there will probably be a choice between where the cuts fall heaviest – on sweeping streets or collecting bins, for the sake of argument. Good insight, consultation and engagement will give councillors perspective on the relative weights of different opinions. This can inform how they make judgements about competing views, to reflect the balance of residents’ opinion as far as possible.

It’s also good to get stakeholders and residents involved in the process as early as possible. Some preliminary insight from residents might help you work out where their priorities lie. That way you can design your engagement so that it’s couched in the right terms and addresses the right things.

In some instances, the scope for change on a decision will be low or zero. In this situation good councils must have the courage to tell residents “Not everyone can get what they want, but we’ll be clear with you about why.” In the long run councils need to trust that they’ll get more credit for having been straight and transparent with those who feel they have lost out in a decision. Many of the stickiest problems occur because councils don’t do this, instead choosing to dress as a consultation something that’s actually just an information process. The tool on the dos and don’ts of breaking bad news explains some of the key points around difficult information processes. Key things to avoid saying for example, include “It’s not as bad as you think,” and “I know how you feel.”

Once the parameters of a choice have been made, however, genuine openness to new ideas or strong feeling among residents is vital. Engagement should be real, authentic, and demonstrably meaningful. You should not enter into it unless you’re genuinely willing, within the pre-set parameters, to act on what the public want.

The Royal Society of Arts have identified five ‘myths’, common in some organisations, which might explain why they are often hesitant to let communities wield power (even within fairly narrow parameters). Each of these myths is explained and confronted in this tool, featured in the Asset Library.

Believing these myths cannot be an option. The solutions instead lie in pre-engagement: in thinking through at the start the genuine scope for the engagement process, and then in committing to giving citizens real input within it.

36 ‘From Fairy Tale to Reality’, The RSA, 2013, p.8–9
Resources in the Asset Library:

> Tool: From fairy-tale to reality – myths and facts about engagement
> Tool: The dos and don'ts of breaking bad news
> Story: Citizen’s Assemblies in Camden NEW
Pillar B: The role of the councillor in engagement

“Democracy means government by discussion, but it is only effective if you can stop people talking.” Clement Atlee, Prime Minister 1945-1951

The implication of representative democracy is that a politician is elected by their ward or constituency, and then sets off to do their bidding in parliament or at the town hall. Their primary engagement comes with the electoral cycle, when they again need to go and canvas those they represent. Increasingly, of course, this isn’t sufficient.

In local government as well as national, the expectation is that democracy is participatory, with the councillor bringing those they represent into the debate. Councillors still have a huge and vital role to play as decision-makers, and have the ultimate call. Their way of doing this and the dynamic with the electorate is becoming ever more inclusive.

Councillors therefore are at the front line of engagement. They’re going to have to live by a decision day after day, lobbied by residents. It’s their electoral fortune at risk – and they’re often going to be a resident themselves.

Within this, councillors can sometimes undermine decisions the council makes, by choosing to oppose them. However, they can also make a project come to life. Local politicians generally have a close relationship with stakeholders and often lead local opinion. They can broker a compromise and bring together a coalition of the willing. To make the most of this, good engagement needs to be rewarded, recognised and plugged into the council’s corporate mission. The ‘Back of a clipboard’ starter kit in the Asset Library details five approaches for new councillors to become as engaged as possible. You can also read the LGA’s councillor’s workbook on neighbourhood and community engagement for more ideas.

A big part of the responsibility – certainly in councils with an executive decision-making model – lies with frontbenchers leading on policy. They need to ensure frontline councillors are involved from the start. On a big project, this can mean a huge amount of engagement with colleagues. Yet the alternative is for months of work on a policy to be lost because these colleagues were not brought in.
The same goes for opposition groupings, who also have a big role to play. It’s often politically expedient for opposition frontline councillors to criticise changes regardless, and this will always be a factor. But a more a bi-partisan approach can bring a big win for the council’s overall ability to be representative.

Including a range of councillors in a project often leads to compromises on a set of proposals as concerns come to light. A fear of things being watered down like this is often the reason why Frontline councillors are excluded, but fighting through this must be part of the new conversation councils are having. Frontline councillors should no more be bypassed than residents.

Good officers, meanwhile, ought to encourage councillors to provide a steer. There’s sometimes a misplaced fear of less senior politicians in a similar way as there is of residents. Officers and executive councillors live and breathe their projects, so tend to race ahead and become overly rational about what needs to happen. Frontline councillors are a tonic to this. They’re able to empathise more with the community and are sensitive to the subtler consequences of decisions. Empowering councillors by asking them to lead steering groups guarantees that you’ve got someone constructively asking the hard questions – keeping you connected to the concerns of affected groups.

So, informed and involved frontline councillors can play a key role simply by doing what frontline councillors do best: listening and talking to voters. The more they reach into their communities, talking to people beyond the usual suspects or the people that voted for them – the better they can do this. See Pillar E for more on generating this type of outreach through networks.

The danger in talking about council engagement and the councillors role is that people see it as an ‘either, or’ question. Either councillors see their job as the only engagement function at the authority. Or officers take the opposite view, and see the local politicians as merely messengers for their engagement agenda. To work properly, a strategy must make the link between officers and politicians – and hence be the result, in itself, of good internal engagement.

Resources in the Asset Library:
> Tool: Back of a clipboard engagement list – a starter kit for frontline councillors
> Pilot: Read about the councillor role in communicating devolution at GMCA; the resource pack is here (resources within the pack here)
Pillar C: Embedding engagement in the organisation

“A leader is best when people barely know he exists. When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, people will say “We did it ourselves”.”

Lao Tzu, Daoist philosopher

Creating a listening culture and a responsive ethos are some of the most intangible and hardest challenges for a council. To people with busy jobs it can feel like a ‘nice to have’ accessory rather than a key to success. Yet for engagement to mean something beyond a combination of painful consultations and superficial listening events, it needs to be integrated within the whole council’s ethos. It can’t be just something that people see as simply the role of the consultation team or communications department.

Councils that are poor at engaging and do not have it embedded in all that they do, tend to separate engagement out into three distinct ‘functions’:

a. **Thinking function**: a leadership team which is top-down in nature

b. **Listening function**: a consultation team (or individual), which carries out statutory consultation, and feeds back to the leadership team
c. **Speaking function**: a communications department which transmits the council’s message or brand, as set by the leadership team

As the diagram above suggests, for engagement to be embedded and effective, these three functions need to overlap as much as possible. Communications need to be better informed by what consultation activities are telling them about attitudes on the ground.

**Leadership**

This new emphasis on engagement needs to come from the top. Hierarchical organisations are, by definition, not ones which engage well with their staff, and tend to do less well in their interactions with the public as a result (see *Pillar N* for more on how this relates to front-line staff). Leadership is therefore integral to the creation of a responsive culture.

For anyone with any power or responsibility within the organisation, this means trying to empower others. Good leaders look to identify other good leaders among councillors and officers and to encourage them to engage meaningfully, both within the organisation and with residents. This sort of leadership culture enables engagement to be integrated at every level – instead of being something done discreetly by a single team or department.

This helps staff to develop understanding and commitment to ‘why’ things are done and engenders a greater sense of ownership. This will lead to a more engaged workforce at every level – proud to represent the council and keen to feed ideas upwards. Done well, this will be something that goes beyond the council and filters into the community.

**Consultation**

Councils take the temperature of the population in an increasingly wide variety of ways. As well as voicing their opinions to frontline staff, residents can deliver feedback through multiple channels on social media. They can participate in attitude and tracker surveys, which most councils now do regularly – or through feedback forms to specific departments. They may speak to people at events, or even act as council ‘ambassadors’ in the community.
So, there are many new ways in which local people can start a conversation with their authority. ‘Consulting’ residents is something councils in fact do on a daily basis, not just through one off, statutory processes. Those at the council responsible for consultation can see it as their role to capture this, taking on the broader remit of ‘engagement’ – and seeking to get integrate and coordinate this type of listening into different parts of the council.

In addition to this, as the ones speaking to communities and hearing grievances consultation departments have a bigger role to play as communicators – explaining and interacting with those they engage with, to create a genuine dialogue.

Communications

Communications is increasingly a two-way street. This is partly thanks to social media and new tools like blogs with comment sections which gives residents far more ‘right of response’. As well as this, more interactivity is brought about through the nature of modern communications, which increasingly uses different channels – like events – and a campaign mentality which seeks to engage.

This often reflects the mood among the public, with communities anxious to have a voice and be listened to. So, the communications role is increasingly about listening, just as the consultation role is increasingly about speaking.

Meanwhile, there is also more and more of a communications function in other parts of the council. Customer service departments speak to residents daily, and service-led departments send out letters and texts. So, to become a more engaged council, communications teams often need to take on a broader remit than they traditionally have.

Resources in the Asset Library:

> Test: What type of council are you?
> Pilot: Read about Harlow’s culture change drive; the tool developed as part of this can be viewed here
Pillar D: Co-production and partnerships

“My guideline is that a conversation partner should be speaking 80 per cent of the time, while I speak only 20 per cent of the time. Moreover, I seek to make my speaking time count by spending as much of it as possible posing questions rather than trying to have my own say.” Bernard T. Ferrari, academic and author 37

Co-production is one of those terms that’s crept into the public policy vocabulary, and tends to be used a lot. We kind of know what it means – but it’s still fairly vague.

It’s more than just a public policy idea, however; it’s a part of modern life. When you custom-design a card online or scan your own groceries at the supermarket you’re co-producing with the company in question to get the most tailored possible service. (Personalised budgets are an example of this model of ‘personal co-production’ within the public sector. See Pillar K for more on this).

But as well as ‘personal co-production’, there’s ‘collective co-production’, which offers an impact on the wider community. This collective approach is often used for building trust and making the most of social capital,38 and is probably the most relevant to this guide. Examples range from participatory budgeting to community garden initiatives.39 The idea is that government and the community work together, enabling one another, with greater and greater citizen empowerment as a result. (See the case study of transport for children with special educational needs in Coventry.)

Central to co-production is the realisation that you as a council need the input and insight of the resident as much as they need you. There are skills which people in the community have, and these can be built upon. This moves your authority’s role away from delivery and towards enabling mutual relationships which will support this approach.

To co-produce well, think through the places where you might be able to collaborate for each project or service.

37 Author of Power Listening
38 ‘We’re all in this together: harnessing user and community co-production of public outcomes’, Institute of Local Government Studies, Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013
This might include budgeting, commissioning, design, delivery or even evaluation. Ideas such as citizen juries are examples of how co-production approaches can be applied to decision-making. (See Glossary for more on what these are).

There are challenges involved, of course. One of the joys of co-production is that there’s a degree of unpredictability. Co-production must also be something that’s part of a council’s ethos – not tucked away in a separate department.

To get to this point it’s important to be clear about the limits of co-production as well as the possibilities. Co-production isn’t always suitable, and – as with all types of engagement – it needs to happen within clear parameters. The ‘Wisdom of crowds’ case study is an example of these limitations, showing that if the scope is too broad a co-produced approach can lead to a lack of direction and ultimately apathy.

You can begin by creating pilot projects to test the water – but your target must be for whole services (and ultimately the whole authority) to be comfortable with co-production methods. That needs leadership and staff development.

You also need to ensure that co-production doesn’t privilege some groups and communities over others. This danger is pointed out by the Association of Public Service Excellence and the Trade Union Congress, who say that “The skills and capacity to engage in co-production are not evenly distributed, creating disproportionate and often unfair disadvantage between communities.”

This is an important thing to acknowledge: co-production, more than any of the other approaches described in this guide, runs the risk of generating the least engagement from the very people that need it most. Taking steps to “map” communities will help you understand capabilities and levels of confidence and competence among residents. This can feed into the approach you take to co-production, making sure that it’s inclusive. It can also help you to focus on building capacity. If a community lacks the IT skills to co-design a community website, for instance, then you need to focus on giving people these skills first.

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40 ‘We’re all in this together: harnessing user and community co-production of public outcomes’, Institute of Local Government Studies, Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013

41 ‘Making co-production work – lessons from local government’, TUC and APSE, 2013
This is undoubtedly hard work and there’s a lot to do, but it will be rewarding in the long term. It can also, once a virtuous circle is created, become a way of saving money. Lambeth Living Well, for example, estimate that 20 per cent savings to mental health budgets have been made through co-produced approaches. It'll create social and organisational capital, and create fit-for-purpose services that are more relevant and potentially more efficient.

Resources in the Asset Library:

> Tool: Six key steps in campaign co-production
> Story: New ways of getting children to school in Coventry
> Story: The wisdom of crowds – the co-produced football club, and what we can learn from it
> Knowledge: Citizens Juries – a Q&A
> Story: Engaging with what customers really want in Mole Valley NEW
Pillar E: Structured decision-making about budgets and planning

“A place for everything and everything in its place,” Benjamin Franklin

While consultation is about ensuring decision-makers have all the facts they need to make a choice for their community, there are a number of ways of making the decision-making process more structured. The more residents’ decisions are subject to the restrictions and parameters that councils are, and the more they are encouraged to think through and design solutions on this basis, the more robust the process. This tends to require a more intense and lengthy type of engagement, but the benefits can be significant.

There are various specialised tools which have been developed over the years, to give residents greater involvement through forms of structured decision-making. This can apply to any policy or service, but there are two areas in particular where specialised decision-making has a big role to play. These are financial and planning engagement. These are topics where limitations are most obvious and acute. You cannot, without breaking the law, decide to spend money that is not there, or build on land that does not exist.

*Involving residents in spending priorities not only provides an opportunity to foster more direct local democracy; it can enable greater understanding of the tough financial decisions which councils face. A set of ten key principles around public participation and finance can be found in the Asset Library.*

Broadly speaking, engagement around council budget-setting falls into two camps: simulated and participatory.

1. **Simulated decision-making** is where financial choices are set out through a mocked-up budget-setting process. Simple exercises might involve allocating a certain number of coins to individual service areas. More sophisticated techniques, such as the process known as SIMALTO, weight different options so as to allow complex trade-offs between different types of expenditure. Councils are increasingly turning to online simulators as a means of increasing participation (such as the LB Brent simulator). These tools allow the complex interactions between services to be more easily displayed, and the outcomes show how different communities and demographics would make these choices.
2. Participatory budgeting was born in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre. At the start of each budget cycle public assemblies are convened across the city, to discuss how all unfixed expenditure should be allocated. The **Porto Alegre Model** provides a roadmap for participatory budgeting best practice. Unlike simulated budgeting, which creates a hypothetical scenario, citizens have a direct, definitive chance to feed into budgets. In this respect it is consultative rather than engagement-based. In the UK, participatory budgeting has typically taken the form of small pots of funding being set aside, with public meetings allowing residents to vote on how to spend the pot. (Durham County Council has been running a participatory budgeting model along these lines since 2011). But the basic principles are the same as in Brazil, with representative citizen panels convened, and priorities weighted up.

Planning is the other area where structured decision-making can play a big role. While consultation is a statutory requirement of planning applications, more active engagement with stakeholders at an earlier stage not only helps to reduce opposition to applications but can result in development projects which genuinely meet the needs of the local community.

This is particularly important because planning consultation can end up being dealt with in a fairly discrete way – separate from other engagement strategies. This stems from the fact that many of the considerations are so technical; a more statutory approach is sometimes unavoidable. But even small efforts to create a broader engagement ethos around planning can make a big difference.

Several specialised engagement tools have been designed to give stakeholders the opportunity to co-create regeneration projects. The most significant types of approach are Planning for Real™ and charrettes.

1. **Planning for Real™** is a branded process, which undertakes engagement using scaled-down 3D models. Best practice involves a group of local residents building the initial model from scratch, with the support of professionals, to take ownership over the process. The resulting model is then used at engagement events. Stakeholders place comment cards directly onto the model or give feedback in other ways, enabling detailed responses to be captured. Another round subsequently takes place, at which all the suggestions are set out for decision-makers to weigh up.

2. **Planning charrettes** is an intensive process which brings together planning teams and residents, to produce the design for a site over several days. After initial brainstorming, ideas are worked up as various proposals by the
planning team and then brought back for feedback the next day. This is followed by a further round of revisions to the proposals. This process is repeated for several days before a final plan emerges, enabled by the creative interplay between planners and users of the would-be site. The ultimate outcome is then put through a final round of engagement, with a broader audience.

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The growing call for direct, hands-on consultation about finance and planning reflects wider changes. These are areas where consultations are increasingly about negative changes, such as where to make cuts, rather than positive ones, like where to spend extra revenue. Hence, smaller budgets, and an increasing number of controversies about redevelopment (especially in big cities), mean an increasing pressure on authorities to show their workings.

Running alongside this is a concurrent desire, from councils, to demonstrate to the public the difficulty of the decisions they are now being forced to make.

In this context, it is worth authorities considering their own underlying motivations. Straitened times make the sorts of techniques we’re talking about more important, but also place more emphasis on councils to ensure they make structured decision-making into something creative, positive and open.

Resources in the Asset Library:
> Knowledge: Participatory budgeting and the Porto Alegre Model NEW
> Knowledge: The 10 Principles of Public Participation in Fiscal Policy NEW
> Knowledge: Key questions for successful charrettes NEW
> Story: Participatory budgeting in Cheshire NEW
Section 2.2: Trust in the community

As well as direct relationships between councils and the community, high levels of trust can also benefit relations between different groups within the community.

When the council doesn’t inspire trust – when decisions aren’t explained, or grievances are ignored – the result is poor cohesion and suspicion of other groups whereas the idea of ‘collective efficacy’ shows how, if people feel that others in their community are engaged, they’ll be far more willing to engage themselves. If you would like to know more about collective efficacy, then you can read about it in the Asset Library.

Evidence in the past shows that when residents understand the pressures the council is under, they step up. Listening properly and explaining fully and honestly can build resilience and involve people who are hard to reach (or hard to hear).

The following five pillars each offer practical advice on how engagement within localities and neighbourhoods can improve relations with – and within – communities.

- **Pillar F**: Social networks and the role of messengers
- **Pillar G**: ‘Place’ and engagement
- **Pillar H**: Capacity-building and citizen power
- **Pillar I**: Engagement and cohesion
- **Pillar J**: Hard-to-reach communities

If you would prefer then you can skip straight on to ‘Trust in the system’ or go back to ‘Trust in democracy’.
Pillar F: Social networks and the role of messengers

“The currency of real networking is not greed but generosity.”
Keith Ferrazzi, author and networking expert

Anyone who’s run a public engagement activity knows that they aren’t always as inclusive as they could be. The ‘usual suspects’ – people who are connected, confident, and knowledgeable about local issues – are often best at having their voices heard. When the concerns of only the most determined individuals monopolise the conversation, then the concerns of the isolated or alienated can be obscured.

The key to unlocking inclusive participation lies in bolstering social networks. When people have strong social networks, they find out about new developments more quickly and feel more empowered to have their say. Foundation III has already looked at how you can make sure the format and approach of your engagement process reaches everyone. This pillar looks at how the channels available to the council can run much deeper into the community, building on the networks that already exist between people.

Often, it’s people’s circumstances that determine whether or not they have strong connections. Students, those in work, and people who volunteer usually have robust networks. On the other hand, others – often people who are unemployed or retired – are more cut off from the community and can experience social isolation. In local government consultations, they can find they don’t have the confidence or wherewithal to get their viewpoint across.

Building robust social networks, which extend into the heart of the community, necessitates thinking in bold and creative ways. More often than not, it involves partnering with charities, voluntary associations, resident groups and other organisations who are able to open the door to individuals who otherwise might remain at the periphery.

There are two central approaches here, and they’re subtly different.
The first approach involves forging connections between those unlikely to otherwise meet. Charities like North London Cares, which pairs young professionals with older neighbours, are good examples of this. Such schemes pair more connected people, usually volunteers, who work with the council or the third sector to reach out to members of the community with few social connections – i.e. struggling families, lonely youngsters, or retired people. Approaches can include buddying systems, the use of clubs, and schemes which make it easier to identify and signpost the less well-connected.

Glasgow’s Community Connector programme is a great example of this. The scheme provides the following forms of support, amongst others.

a. **signposting and referring**: Spotting local services, clubs, and groups that can be joined
b. **buddy support**: Accompanying people when they start new activities
c. **volunteering opportunities**: Recognising people as assets in themselves that can support others

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42 See the North London Cares website
43 The LGA engaging young people workbook gives suggestions on how to engage young people
The second approach tends to be used more when the relationship between the council and certain groups, or even whole communities, isn't functioning, and residents have become unresponsive or cynical. Peer-to-peer approaches involve going into communities, speaking to influential community leaders, and building lasting 'connector' or 'ambassador' networks through relationships. This may be the only way of breaking the impasse.

The **Barking and Dagenham case study** shows how this works in a situation where cohesion is poor – but it can be applied to more benign issues too, like if people are ignoring council messages on recycling or petty crime. In the Asset Library are [three key tips for using social networks](#).

By fostering robust networks throughout the community, the groundwork can be laid for genuinely inclusive engagement. Councils put themselves in a better position to work with residents, and channels to reach beyond those who are well-versed or well-connected.

These approaches are obviously of intrinsic value when it comes to addressing challenges relating to mental health, isolation and wellbeing. However, they also work to create more engaged and capable societies, with higher collective efficacy. The worst thing for trust within any community is if people turn inwards and stop speaking to each other.

**Resources in the Asset Library:**

- **Story:** Understanding and harnessing influence in Barking and Dagenham
- **Tool:** Key tips to mapping social networks
Pillar G: ‘Place’ and engagement

“Stood at the top of a hill, Over my town, I was found.” The Verve, 1995

‘Place-branding’, ‘place-building’, ‘place-leadership’, ‘place-based approaches’. These are terms you will probably have heard before, and will certainly hear again. The terminology crops up so often because within it lies the potential to achieve the goals that public service drives towards. The importance of place is why local government exists; it’s why it is local.

This is magnified, of course, by devolution, which is increasingly leading to areas having new powers, new representation, and a stronger sense of regional identity. The GMCA pilot (and the resource pack developed as part of it) is especially interesting to look at in this context, providing an example of the issues involved in engaging, and in building a collective place identity for such a vast area.

In changing times – as the effects of, for example, globalisation mean residents feel that local identity is being lost – this sense of place is all the more vital. Likewise, digitisation and budget cuts mean councils must work extra hard to be seen as champions of an area. With less resource to invest in the public realm, and more services going online, it’s more important than ever that the intangible aspects of “place” become ingrained in an organisation’s DNA.

Effective places tend to be described as flourishing or resilient. Decisions about local issues involve people, and reflect the area’s collective identity and shared aspirations. There’s a strong sense of civic society, with interconnected communities and spaces for residents to meet. Neighbourhoods are cohesive and capacity is high.

Yet creating a place which fits this ideal is inherently complex and organic. Local authorities achieve it when the organisation is truly aligned with the needs and desires of the place. It happens when the council’s responses to problems match the personality of the area. It’s the product of leadership which is place-appropriate, genuinely understanding and enabling of communities.

Creating this sort of organisation won’t happen overnight. It relies on a change in mindset throughout the organisation. The whole council must start to see its role less as a municipal provider – interchangeable with any other council – and more as a proactive champion.

A big part of getting this right comes through strategic communications, informed by research. A serious
effort to understand the personality of your community is a good place to start. Where do residents feel they come from? Do they say they’re from Bexley – or from Slade Green? What are the local things people are proud of? What’s the identity of your borough or county? Idyllic ‘Garden of England’ or ambitious home of Great Expectations? What type of place do people want to live? How do people in your borough see themselves? What’s the personality of the place? Quirky and different? Sought-after and state-of-the-art? Untouched and traditional? Do residents see themselves sticking around? Or is there a high turnover of people? How diverse is the area? Do people see this as a good thing? How equal is the borough? What are the things that people share? The survey builder gives a more extensive list of questions and issues.

Asking these types of questions will help you recognise the relationship between people and place. They go beyond the things that all places share, such as a desire for good services and safer communities, to help inform a deeper sense of what makes your place different. A good example of this is the London Borough of Camden’s resident researcher programme, which uses a strong understanding of place to save money and help insight work to double as engagement.

This information obviously feeds into branding, sense of place and the overall narrative and vision which informs everything you do as a council. It also has deeper implications for decision-making and spending choices, and the sorts of things you can ask of residents. If your residents are young and upwardly mobile for example, the things you can ask of them will be different to if they’re socially conscious retirees.

Leading place is, therefore, about creating an organisation that’s interdependent and cooperative with local communities. More than anything it relies on a deeper understanding of local people and their identity and personality.

Resources in the Asset Library:

- Story: Community researchers in Camden, and how place can feed into strategy
- Tool: Survey builder for understanding your area
- Knowledge: Devolution and place
- Pilot: Read about Hackney’s use of place in its engagement work; the tool developed as part of this can be viewed here
Pillar H: Capacity-building and citizen power

“We can’t do well serving communities…if we believe that we, the givers, are the only ones that are half-full, and that everybody we’re serving is half-empty…there are assets and gifts out there in communities, and our job as good servants and as good leaders…[is] having the ability to recognise those gifts in others, and help them put those gifts into action.” Michelle Obama, former First Lady

People talk a lot about ‘bottom-up’ as opposed to ‘top-down’ government, but what does this actually mean? Generally, the term refers to approaches where local people are drivers of change. It is the citizen power element of engagement – the point beyond mutual co-production, where the community steps up and the council steps back. For many it is an ideal to aspire to, and in the present era of shrinking budgets it is increasingly sought after.

Yet this sort of approach won’t happen on its own. The authority needs to act as an agent and enabler of change – providing tools, building capacity, rolling out good ideas to other parts of the area, speaking to people about what they need, and giving a voice to community leaders. For this to happen there must be a trusting relationship between residents and the local authority, with a strong ongoing dialogue. The council needs to understand residents’ desire and capacity to step up, through listening. Meanwhile, the community needs to be given the confidence and platform to voice ideas and a sense of what the council needs their help with.

To be successful in this, councils can help communities to recognise the assets within the community. Assets are the things people are already doing well in without the council’s help, like social clubs or community projects which sustain themselves, or individuals with the capacity or resources to step up and help others.45

45 The RSA’s Civic Pulse or IDeA’s Glass half-full guide provide tools for mapping these assets
Asset mapping is about recognising the creative and social potential in everyone. In areas ranging from Liverpool to Greenwich to Croydon, research has repeatedly shown that a willingness to contribute more is latent within many communities, pretty much regardless of demographics or economics. It’s up to authorities to listen to residents, so as to find different ways of making the most of this potential resource.

This can’t be done as a simple transfer of responsibility for services from council to community. It needs to be done in a way that has reciprocity at its core. If the council is seen as a public utility, asking people to do more will be like the gas board asking you to help lay the pipe work outside your house. You need to make an ask that is reasonable, finite and understood, and which involves showing of your hand in return and emphasising the benefit to the community. A new conversation with residents involves making this ask, and helping them to see their relationship with the council as a two-way one.

There are different ways to do this, but a big part of it is about giving people the right tools or helping them to develop them themselves. Sometimes investment from government, whether it be charities or the private sector, can help develop people’s skills and build capacity. In order to help people achieve more on their own, councils need to understand what communities can and can’t do, by engaging with them.

There are six ‘bottom up’ techniques which help to do this, by helping understand communities better, and give them the tools to do more. (These are asset-based community development (or ABCD), Neighbourhood Planning, Appreciative enquiry, Crowd-sourcing, Citizens UK and Parishing).

In Croydon for example, ABCD led to the creation of Fair BnB, a project which encourages people with spare rooms to house those on the verge of homelessness – saving the council money on hostels and B&Bs, and building trusted relationships between the council and residents in the process. Meanwhile, the story of Bishopthorpe Road in York (which you can read a first-hand account of by clicking here), shows what citizen power can look like once it really takes off and becomes truly organic.

46 Research carried out by The Campaign Company in Liverpool for the Leadership Centre (2011), for the LB Greenwich resident perception tracker (2016) and for Croydon Council’s Opportunity and Fairness Commission p10-19 (2016)
In other instances, it’s just as much about supporting people to capitalise on what they already do by building on and rolling-out good ideas. If one community has pulled together and sorted out a problem by itself, for example, the council can quite easily spread the idea to other areas and help it to take root. An open-minded approach, which looks to canvass citizens for ideas and listen to their solutions, is vital in making this happen.

To flourish, all of these ideas and others rely on good engagement by councils; engagement that seeks to genuinely listen and sees the positives rather than seeking just to fill the gaps. Building capacity and empowering people isn’t easy – but councils can do it by listening carefully to what they’re being told.

**Resources in the Asset Library:**

- **Knowledge:** *Six key ‘bottom-up’ techniques*
- **Rules:** *Engagement guidance around ‘double devolution’* (see also One Community, the LGA’s guide to partnership between local and principal councils)
- **Story:** *Croydon Opportunity and Fairness Commission and the creation of Fair BnB*
- **Pilot:** Read about *Staffordshire’s effort to build capacity* in the community; the tool developed as part of this can be viewed [here](#)
Pillar I: Engagement and cohesion

“Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change.”
Mary Shelley

Cohesion is a big priority for councils. The word refers to integration, and whether people get on with, understand and have mutual respect for others in their community. (These questions usually apply to tensions between cultural groups or different nationalities, and that is what we mainly address in this chapter. But it can also refer to differences in age or economic status).

In many areas there is rapid migration, high population churn, or economic change which brings in new groups. Meanwhile, different parts of the country have different values and social attitudes, and will respond to change in different ways.

These issues often define the nature of engagement and the conditions in which it takes place. If communities do not trust each other, they are less likely to trust institutions or politicians. Building understanding and respect between citizens is vital for creating strong, inclusive communities, where residents feel they have a voice.

Moreover, a big aspect of consultation and engagement is about managing change. This may be a new housing development or a fresh set of strategic priorities, to reflect shrinking budgets. But it also might be about a new community moving in. Communicating change goes hand-in-hand with building trust.

When it comes to cohesion, there are several aspects to consider so as to get engagement right.

The essential first step is to have grass-roots insight. Trust breaks down when communities feel the council does not grasp the reality on the ground. So, put time into understanding the makeup of your authority, in a way that is granular and up-to-date. If a new community has moved in, it is important that you acknowledge and communicate that a change is taking place. This is especially true if the area does not have much history of migration.

One way to do this is through the TCC/Origins Cohesion ATLAS, which uses name recognition to understand changing communities.
The second step is to know other local characteristics: values, identity, history, economics, demographics, population density and churn. (Take a look at Pillar G, on Place, for more). These are powerful determinants of whether tensions will emerge – forming the backdrop against which change takes place. Values, in particular, are key when it comes to understanding the narratives that are likely to emerge.

If tensions are being driven by something other than an increase in migrant groups (e.g. a local event or news story about cultural tensions) then be sure to understand what this is. Likewise, regeneration projects or other economic changes often play indirectly into how residents feel.

Thirdly, develop narratives and explanations about the changes afoot. These must be based on insight: grounded in the reality of changes or flashpoints, and reflective of how communities feel. By initially engaging with both newer arrivals and members of the existing community, you can think about what these narratives should be. But it is essential that they acknowledge the realities on the ground, while emphasising the shared values of the area. They should stress that this identity is strong enough to absorb change, and should focus on the principles of fairness and the points of commonality or continuity.

There can often be additional aspects to consider here. For instance, there might be simple explanations of different social norms of different communities, which, if clearly explained, can stop barriers from going up and help cross-community understanding.

Fourthly, engage actively on the ground. The groups likely to be alarmed by change are often the least plugged into digital or media networks. They tend to trust friends, family, and individuals they know – people who run pubs, cafes or hairdressers, for instance. They are less trusting of outside professionals or representatives of the council. So, build networks of ‘influencers’ who live in the community, based on peer-to-peer conversations. (See Pillar F, which has more on networks). Work with these local figures to run events in familiar locations, like local businesses, churches or community centres, where you can have open, non-judgemental discussions about changes happening.

Meanwhile, the individuals from outside the immediate community who are most likely to be trusted include local councillors (see Pillar B), frontline council staff (see Pillar N), and other public servants, like community support officers. These stakeholders have regular face-to-face contact with the community, and it is important to work closely with them.
The final step, once dialogue has opened up between the council and the community, is to build relations between residents from different backgrounds. ‘Contact theory’ tells us that the more people meet, the more they find common ground. So, look at less direct types of engagement, which create connections. You could enable types of civic engagement or citizen power which create bridges between communities, for instance – like tech workshops between younger migrant residents and older citizens.

The above steps are far from exhaustive. But engagement based on solid insight, supported by a focus on place identity and social networks, can go a long way to building cohesion and including residents in changes happening.

Resources in the Asset Library:
> Story: The link between engagement and cohesion in Bexley NEW
> Test: Narratives about change – understanding your area NEW
Pillar J: Hard-to-reach communities

“No one is hard to reach, just more expensive to reach. It is important to put more effort and creativity in reaching these groups,” Paul Vittles, engagement consultant

Done badly, consultation can fall into the trap of disproportionately involving those who are keenly motivated or find it easy to engage. At best this is unrepresentative and at worst it can lead to poor decisions and the squandering of resources.

This highlights two challenges. Firstly, the people most energised to attend engagement events are not necessarily those who speak for the wider spread of opinion, but rather those with the strongest views one way or the other.

Secondly, if you only speak to those already engaged, the chances are that you will not hear from those who are time-poor or money-poor. Likewise, those with lower levels of education, social networks, language skills, or confidence in their ability to change things. The loudest voices are sometimes those with the least to lose from the choices at stake.

The TCI rules of good practice focus on this, and everyone acknowledges that speaking to hard-to-reach groups is difficult. It is not possible to guarantee that the stakeholders you speak to are 100 per cent representative or inclusive. But there are many steps you can take to increase your chances.

Some of these are statutory, and are set out in Section 1. Foundation III looks at how the medium you choose can help you hear a range of opinions. But beyond this there are several principles, techniques and considerations.

1. Use the right channels and don’t just use one. Unless you are engaging with a very specific group, it is important to have a strong presence online and offline (see Pillar M for more on digital engagement). Make sure your efforts go beyond just providing options, and find specific channels to reach specific audiences. For instance, you might try and do separate vox-pops, or home visits to a particular group, if you know they are unlikely to attend larger events.
2. **Recruit a cross-section of residents.** Use the information you have about the profile of the area to weight your attendees. This can be done both with council/census data (e.g. for a particular ward) and with service data (e.g. audience research that a library or children’s centre in question might have compiled). You can use quotas to make sure that the stakeholders you speak to are representative of the wider sample when it comes to faith, background, profession, disability, language needs etc. Some councils use resident panels, so that they have a representative, regularly refreshed pool to call on. Your council will probably have a huge reservoir of existing data – so find it and draw on it.

3. **Take small steps to engage the least confident.** There are many practical ways of making engagement easier for those with less confidence or faith in the system. For example, always look for venues which the least likely to attend will feel comfortable in – somewhere as local, convenient and familiar as possible. Think through the small issues that might be barriers – refreshments, access, finishing times. Be clear from the outset about whether it is ok to bring other members of the family, as childcare will often be a factor.

4. **Seek out those who know least.** Work hard, during recruitment, to identify those with less prior information. Screening questions like ‘Do you run a community organisation?’ or ‘Have you stood as a councillor?’ can help reach beyond those already engaged. This will be likely to require larger incentives and a greater emphasis on convenience, but will be worth it. Meanwhile a good rule of thumb, during the engagement, is to assume ‘maximum intelligence, minimum information.’ Make sure the events or surveys you run provide simple explanatory information. For example, you can provide mini-booklets with basic FAQs, so that those not already up-to-speed can have a voice.

5. **Think about social networks.** By engaging in advance with faith leaders and local influencers you can find mechanisms to reach further into communities. Individuals already prominent in the neighbourhood are more likely to be trusted, especially by less confident or aware residents. You will need to design easy ways for them to further engage with their networks, such as simple response cards or ways to text in views. Local influencers can also give a sense of existing opinion about the issues at stake. Pre-engagement of this kind can be vital in making sure you know the shape of public opinion, and hear from the most disillusioned or hostile.
6. **Be creative and work smart.** Apply the principle of first going to where people are, rather than expecting them to come to you. Work in partnership with third party organisations to secure the engagement of hard to engage groups. A modest incentive to the organisation can be hugely cost effective. Designing easy ways for groups to engage their members is also important. Consider designing simple DIY engagement kits to help with this. (See, for example, Durham Council’s DIY engagement toolkit).

These steps are not exhaustive, and they obviously change depending on the type of engagement. But within them are many of the key principles for going beyond the comfort zone.

**Resources in the Asset Library:**

- Story: [Engaging hard-to-reach groups in Worcestershire](#) NEW
- Story: [Hearing the full range of regeneration perspectives, in York](#) NEW
- Tool: [Durham DIY engagement toolkit](#) NEW
Section 2.3: Trust in the system

This section looks at how better engagement can create more faith in the system as a whole.

One of the overlooked elements of trust is that it makes things predictable for people. When people understand how the system works and find it easier to interact with it, they become more engaged.

Often, this doesn't happen and people do not trust their council. Even when they're satisfied with the services they receive, they feel the authority is bureaucratic and impenetrable – that they're being processed rather than engaged with as individuals.

Better and more personalised service design can change this, creating systems that people understand and feel responsive to them. While this may not be what we immediately think of as engagement, it can create the type of day-to-day relationship that builds capacity and prevents cynicism.

The following five pillars look at how this can be achieved.

- **Pillar K**: Personalisation and the direct channels of engagement
- **Pillar L**: The role of social media
- **Pillar M**: Online consultation and the switch to digital
- **Pillar N**: The role of frontline staff
- **Pillar O**: Continuous engagement and relationship-building

If you would prefer then you can go back to 'Trust in democracy' or 'Trust in the community', or return to Section 1: Covering the basics.
Pillar K: Personalisation and the direct channels of engagement

“I have always depended on the kindness of strangers”
Blanche DuBois, A Streetcar Named Desire, Tennessee Williams

Personalisation is the process of building services around a citizen. Done well it means each person has a single, ongoing and unique relationship with local services rather than a set of individual interactions. Residents have a whole, end-to-end experience, rather than variable and unsatisfactory interactions.

This links to the joining up of local government and public services. As such, it may seem like a never-ending task which is inherently structural, administrative and abstract – the opposite of engagement.

Yet the end goal of personalisation is closely linked to engagement. It is part of the vision already set out, of local government not as a supplier but as a listener and an enabler. There is a lot of evidence that it’s one of the most important ways councils can build real trust. The more you personalise relationships with residents, the more you can engage with them.

The obvious reason for this is that people are more likely to trust and speak to their point of contact at the local council than they are with a series of strangers. The think-tank Demos put this simply, following research on trust in 2008:47

“Most people contact their council only very occasionally when things go wrong, engaging in one-off problem-solving interactions. This kind of relationship does not create much space for trust formation...If local government wants to build trust, the first step is to develop a better kind of relationship with the people it serves...These improved relationships will have to be long-term, consistent and characterised by honesty and reciprocity.”

They go so far as to suggest giving every member of the public a named caseworker.

While most organisations aren’t quite at this stage yet, the personalisation agenda in adult social care is an example of how the idea is gaining traction. Within the sector, care users are increasingly central to determining how funds are spent on their care, creating a more ‘engaged’ process than more prescriptive approaches.

Meanwhile, one example from within the local government sector is in Croydon, where the local authority tried to manage benefit changes in a more personalised way. They proactively contacted and engaged with 3,300 of those in households potentially affected by changes, referring individuals to appropriate support services. The goal was to maximise residents’ income and encourage financial resilience before changes to welfare payments took place. The consequence was not only better outcomes but less tensions with the authority. It was held up in Parliament as an example of good practice.48

The Institute for Government points out that achieving this sort of personalisation itself relies on good engagement – both with service users and other service providers:49

“The best way to do this is through face-to-face conversations…People need the opportunity to ask questions…and delve deeper into what can and cannot be applied to a particular context.”

Put another way, engagement and personalisation create a virtuous circle. If your staff have personalised interactions with residents, the two parties will be more engaged; and if staff are more engaged with resident needs, they can create more personalised services.

Data coordination is important here. Indeed, there is a whole technological dimension to personalisation. The Government’s ‘Tell Us Once’ service, which allows you to inform the state about the death of a loved one within a couple of minutes, is a good example of this, sparing grieving relatives the pain of having to tell multiple institutions about their loss. Many councils are taking a similar approach, using data-sharing to build their online services around the individual and make it easier to have proper relationships with them.

The Newport Case Study in the Asset Library is a good example.

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49 ‘Local public service reform’ Institute for Government, 2016, p.17-20
Responsibility for achieving this lies at all levels of your council. Simple thought experiments, like asking how your work impacts another service or department, can get people thinking about overlaps, duplication and a lack of a person-centred approach. Likewise, the next time you’re engaging or consulting, think about the process you’ve got in place. Do the ways in which you’re asking for feedback feel impersonal and bureaucratic? If so what could you do differently, so that stakeholders can put a name to a face (and feel more engaged in the process as a result)?

Overall, engaging with and prioritising user voices is at the heart of the personalisation agenda and this is something everyone can do. A more personal service should lead to a closer and higher quality relationship between residents and the council and vice versa, with personalisation and engagement reinforcing one another as much as possible.

Resources in the Asset Library:

> Story: 'Digital and personalisation' – Newport case study

50 Demos sets out a recommendation in a 2014 paper to engage families as early as possible in discussions about outcomes that targeted services will pursue and be held to account for. See, ‘Ties that bind’, Demos, 2014
Pillar L: The role of social media

“If you make customers unhappy in the physical world, they might each tell six friends. If you make customers unhappy on the internet, they can each tell 6,000 friends.” Jeff Bezos

Few technologies can claim to match the speed with which social media has grown. The world’s largest social media platform, Facebook, went from non-existence in 2003 to being accessed by over a quarter of the world’s population today on a regular basis. For many, social media plays not only a day-to-day role, but an hour-to-hour or even minute-to-minute one.

This growth has come with challenges for engagement. For local authority engagement teams, social media presents both a risk and an opportunity. It can enflame the issue when things go wrong. But it can also drastically improve dialogue between residents and council, and accelerate the speed at which ideas and behaviours catch on.

Of course, almost every local authority will already have a Facebook page and Twitter account, and most will be following the fundamentals when it comes to the social media comms function. These include: providing regular updates, keeping posts brief, using pictures and videos, adopting a conversational style, assigning a rota of point-people to run the respective feeds, etc. Generally speaking, the engagement remit of social media tends to be to flag and promote serious consultations, to soak up and respond to individual anger, and to give residents a say in smaller decisions.

However, there are a number of principles through which you can go beyond this, and really harness the power of social media so that it is a net positive for your engagement work.

An important initial point is about narrative. Problems can occur when organisations do not know their own narratives, or what their customers are saying about them. (See When social media goes wrong – our case study of an organisation trying to engage its customer base without knowing its own story).

For instance, if your council has a very poor reputation in a certain service area, calling on residents for tips, ideas or means of further improvement might go down worse than if you ask for honest opinions. So, if you are looking to strike up new engagement through social media, have a clear understanding of the conversation which is already taking place about you.
Social media also requires a balance between audacious content and playing it safe. The temptation, especially for organisations like councils with big statutory responsibilities, is to err on the side of caution. Yet to achieve interaction of any kind, dialogue and content must be responsive, proactive and flexible.

To resolve this, set yourself clear guidelines about how much users of your social media feeds can expect to really have their voice heard and change things – and how much those staffing the feeds can promise. (See Keeping it fun with social media engagement).

Another thing to consider is how you reach different audiences. The risk on digital platforms can be that the loudest voices speak most, giving a skewed impression of things. Try to identify users who are not engaging with the council directly, but are perhaps using social media to talk about other local matters (e.g. a sports club or food market in the area). The site Nextdoor is a good example of this, and is used by some authorities to link up with other agencies working in the community.

Meanwhile, although using public money for advertising and targeting can be a controversial, it is also a cost-effective way of reaching different localities and demographics. So, when trying to access hard-to-reach groups, or to hear from key stakeholder sub-sets, paid-for advertising is worth considering. If targeted well, this can be extremely cost-effective.

In general, councils often rely on residents consciously choosing to engage via their social media channel. This leaves the onus on residents to come to the site each time, and reduces the overall number of responses. With a bigger effort to capture contact details when they access the council, and by making a stronger request for residents to sign up in all outgoing communication, local authorities can build a broader social media audience.

Another factor is the role of social media as a monitoring mechanism, to listen to what people are talking about in the community. Obviously, there is a risk to be aware of here, that you hear a partial account of things. But good authorities will monitor both their own social media channels and comments made on other channels, such as those of local news media. This helps you stay ahead of the conversation, and hear about grievances sooner rather than later. Increasingly, platforms are available to help with the monitoring of trends and emerging issues, giving councils the chance to get ahead of the story.
A last point is about choosing channels. The landscape of social media is open to constant change, with new entrants emerging all the time and the popularity of the major channels fluctuating. Deciding which is the best for social media engagement will depend on the type of content involved and the nature of the audience you are trying to reach (see Foundation III for more about the key decisions here).

Think hard about these choices. For instance, if you are approaching businesses, look at LinkedIn. If it is opinion formers with local influence, then consider Twitter. If you are looking to monitor opinion, there are different options again. Our channel chooser tool helps with these choices.

Resources in the Asset Library:
- Tool: BRAIN: getting the most from social media NEW
- Story: Keeping it fun with social media engagement NEW
- Tool: Social media channel chooser NEW
- Story: Kent’s use of social media to raise the profile of consultation NEW
- Story: When digital goes wrong
- Tool: Using social media to deliver co-assessment NEW
Pillar M: Online consultation and the role of digital

“The Internet is becoming the town square for the global village of tomorrow,”

Bill Gates

Over recent years local authorities have made increasing use of online consultation, in some cases as an additional strand to their offline activities and in others as a replacement. The much lower costs, both in terms of time and money, makes online consultation an attractive option for councils facing tough financial pressures.

Online consultations can certainly play an important role in engaging residents and stakeholders, enabling participation by a much larger and more widely distributed pool of people. However, it is not without its risks, particularly when it comes to ensuring that every relevant group is consulted. Not everyone has access to technology or is capable of engaging with an online consultation, this is particularly true of more vulnerable or hard-to-reach demographics. In tackling this issue, online consultation at the very least needs to be advertised offline and have an accompanying paper-based mechanism for groups and individuals to feed-in.

Even when every demographic group appears to be included in the responses, systematic biases can still remain. Consultation online is highly self-selecting and the groups which choose to engage can contain underlying similarities, such as an active interest in local politics, which results in their views being different from those of the general public (it is believed that this underlying bias in participation was a major factor in the failure of online polling firms to accurately predict the outcome of the 2015 General Election).

Online consultation is a powerful engagement tool, but it must be used with both eyes open. This is especially true given that, for many of the residents who are least engaged or most hostile to change, new technology is seen as the problem, not the solution. Vulnerable or disillusioned individuals may not be online, and those who are online often still prefer to speak to a human. While tech platforms should be seen as mechanisms for better connecting with residents on their terms, there is a risk that this means less engagement, not more.

So, how do you avoid this pitfall? Like many of the prerequisites to good engagement, the factors which determine the success of digital consultation are often the decisions made beforehand.
Deciding whether to use digital engagement at all, and if so which channels, is vital in ensuring that your online consultation does not fall flat. In particular, it is important to satisfy yourself that you are not choosing digital engagement channels for their own sake – and to ensure that everyone running the consultation is happy with the choice. A half-hearted digital consultation can feed suspicion of a ‘tick box’ approach, and lead to platforms becoming ‘white elephants’ which do not get used.

Likewise, be sure that you are not choosing digital purely as a cheaper option. It is true that online channels can be more cost-effective in reaching larger audiences. But they must be properly staffed, resourced and designed, with coherent offline alternatives provided. Good strategic decisions at the start will provide clarity about why you have chosen the precise digital channels which you have as your engagement basis, and about the value you are hoping to add by choosing them.

The **Dos and Don’ts of digital engagement** provides more information about these points. Meanwhile, many of the basic issues here are addressed in **Foundation III: How do I decide which medium and channels to use?** – such as considerations like age and internet access. But the central point is that digital consultation should be a positive, coherent choice, not an economic default or a ‘nice to have’ afterthought.

Once you’ve chosen to make digital the basis for your engagement, it is important to consider specific online engagement platforms. The range of facilities available varies from platform to platform, but each can move councils a step beyond traditional online surveys, offering quicker forms of data analysis, better integration-functionality across devices and new tools for capturing insight.

The latter might include the aggregation of comments made on social media, and methods for building online communities around projects. New platforms are coming forward all the time and some councils are building their own bespoke systems, but the **Examples and innovations** resource gives a sense of some of those currently leading the market.

Every platform has its own strengths and weaknesses and it is important to select a package which meets the goals of your authority in undertaking online consultation. It may well be that as a sector, local government needs to push for further improvements to these tools to create platforms which deliver in the round.

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51 Note that it is especially important to be mindful of the legal requirements local authorities hold around data protection and security when using tools online, particularly when working with companies and websites based outside of the UK’s domain.
Resources in the Asset Library:

- Rules: Guidance from The Consultation Institute
- Story: Engaging through digital in Newcastle NEW
- Knowledge: Examples and innovations
- Rules: The dos and don'ts of online consultation NEW
Pillar N: The role of frontline staff

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not a single act.” Aristotle

Engaging with residents is arguably more important for public-facing staff than anyone else in the authority. Front-line staff speak to local people when they encounter residents out and about, or using council services. They are often in the community on a day-to-day basis, visiting people's homes or tending to the public realm. This is something that no one else at the authority does and it’s immensely important.

To start with, experiences with staff have a far greater impact on attitudes to the council than conventional channels. For example, if you read an article in a local authority’s magazine you’ll be less likely to change your opinion than you would be from a good interaction with a council employee or contractor who fixed your boiler.

That said, findings have shown that the public will be more likely to hold the authority responsible if they have a bad experience with a member of council staff than if they have a good one. Positive experiences tend to be attributed “to the individual providing that service rather than [to trust in] the institution to provide consistently high standards.”

Senior staff reading this might feel they’re damned if they do and damned if they don’t. They get blamed if things go wrong with front-line staff, but none of the praise when things go well.

Yet a huge part of this is about the quality of the relationship between public-facing employees and the council (see Pillar C, which looks at embedding engagement at every level). If the authority is top-down, and front-line teams feel they have no autonomy, they’re likely to take on a ‘gatekeeper mentality’. They’ll defend council decisions, but won’t have been given the power to change them or the information to explain them. This can lead to disengagement for which residents understandably blame the council.

In this top-down climate, meanwhile, staff who do go the extra mile will feel they’re doing so off their own bat not as wider representatives of the organisation. In extreme cases, they may side with residents in disputes, becoming cynical, and feeling the service they give is happening in spite of a stifling council bureaucracy. So, a crucial question to ask yourself, set out in the test in the Asset Library, is what staff say about the council when they’re off duty.

Either way, the answer is to provide better internal engagement. The more front-line staff are encouraged to take initiative, and given room to manoeuvre, the more they become ambassadors for the organisation. If staff feel they have more power and responsibility in their jobs, they’ll be more engaged than if the authority’s structure seems remote or top down.

When it comes to employees, good engagement within the organisation is the best – if not the only – route to good engagement beyond the organisation. If you’re a Leader or senior manager at a council, start by thinking about relations with colleagues immediately junior to you rather than about engagement with residents. In doing this, it isn’t enough for the Leader or CEO to dispatch a memo to all employees. Front-line staff must be invested in the change, with a genuine devolution of power and responsibility. If they are not, then day-to-day pressures will triumph.

Part of this can emerge from a second element of front-line staff’s role in engagement, which is through being the eyes and ears of the council. Not only do public-facing employees have a chance to report back concerns and observe the mood within neighbourhoods, they also spend time in communities where insight can be gathered for other departments.

For example, someone might undertake a small practical favour for someone struggling with their care package. Reporting that action back to a relevant council department can play a big part in making authorities more responsive. It could mean, for example, that the care team is able to intervene earlier, and prevent a problem escalating. Giving staff a remit beyond the narrow realm of their specific job title can be a good means of improving engagement at every level. A great real-life example of this is provided in the case study from York, where child safety teams linked up with streets teams to tackle abuse.

These approaches often build on what people are already doing informally. They’ll often be doing so in their capacity as citizens, and feel they’re engaging regardless of (or in spite of) what their employer wants them to do. The key is to encourage staff to have the mechanisms to make their input meaningful and confidence to act in these instances through knowing the council is backing them. Only by doing this can public-facing staff be genuinely engaged.
Section 2.3: Trust in the system

Resources in the Asset Library:

> Story: Child safety in York
> Test: Knowing your staff
Pillar O: Continuous engagement and relationship-building

Earlier in this document, Foundation I included some of the different ways you can try and measure satisfaction and trust. Foundation VII described the importance of evaluating your consultation and engagement activities – with part of the aim being to see if they’ve improved trust in decision-making.

However, it’s important to be clear that satisfaction and trust are different.

Service satisfaction is potentially brittle. It doesn’t require residents to understand competing priorities and pressures. It won’t necessarily last if the quality of a service fails.

Trust, on the other hand, is a more ‘earned’ quality. It’s defined less by how good people feel bin collections are, and more by how engaged they feel and how much they sense the council is on their side.

Bridging the gap between the two is tricky. Satisfaction is generally easier to achieve than trust. Satisfaction with services often remains high (despite reduced budgets), yet political trust is lower. This is sometimes known as the ‘performance paradox’, in which services improve but the authority doesn’t get the credit.53

This paradox is hard to explain, but part of it comes from public sector organisations seeing their role as purely service driven. The council may provide for residents, but it doesn’t speak for or to them.

How you turn this round is the million-dollar question, of course.

Firstly, to answer this question, you need to shift the balance away from unavoidable or forced engagement, by speaking to people before things go wrong. The more sophisticated your approach to engagement, the less you’ll need to rely solely on evaluations of individual consultation exercises – and the more you can use continuous forms of engagement, wedded with continuous measurement of satisfaction and trust.

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53 Ben Casselman describes this in relation to The Iowa Paradox, where voters in the US are sceptical about economic improvements despite all supporting evidence.
In an ultra-responsive council, engagement and satisfaction measurement should become virtually intertwined, with regular listening exercises done to involve residents and gain insights. Consulting a neighbourhood about a proposed change won’t be as daunting when the situation comes around, because you will have already been speaking to people on a monthly basis. You’ll know the terrain and have designed your consultation accordingly. In return, you might be given more benefit of the doubt.

In the long run, this means you’ll have less and less forced engagement or statutory consultation – and more and more positive listening exercises and day-to-day engagement.

This is the engagement equivalent of fixing the roof when the sun’s shining; speaking to people when you don’t have to, so that you cultivate more trust, understanding and solutions for when a problem does happen. Slowly, over time, this type of ethos can change how people view a council. It can alter the perception among some residents that authorities “only bother asking us when they want something”.

Secondly, it’s important to use more qualitative techniques. As things stand, residents are often surveyed quantitatively, about bin collections or roads. However, they’re less frequently taken into a room and asked how they feel about the council, or what ideas they’ve got.

Engagement processes that achieve this, if done regularly and taken seriously – and especially if done with influential community leaders – can make it more likely that local people will credit the council for improvements in its individual services.

In doing this, it’s also important to work out where your problems come from. The ‘competence versus intentions’ tool offers a way to work this out. Ask people questions specifically about service satisfaction – and then specifically about performance – so you can hone in on exactly where the problem lies. The more trust is the issue, then the more good engagement is likely to be the answer.

Ultimately, there’s no neat ABC to delivering these sorts of things. However, the key components are:

1. an emphasis on engaging when you don’t need to
2. an emphasis on measuring through qualitative types of approach based on a two-way dialogue, instead of numbers-based surveys
3. an emphasis on measuring trust as much as service satisfaction

If councils can move in this direction, then engagement and satisfaction can form a virtuous circle. Whereas engaging reactively, sporadically or retrospectively has only limited benefit, sustained engagement builds trust and improves relationships with residents.

**Resources in the Asset Library:**

- Test: [How is your council perceived on the competence versus intentions axis?](#)
- Story: [Ward Action Groups in Hammersmith and Fulham NEW](#)
What next?
As this refresh shows, New Conversations 2.0 is an evolving guide. Once you have started deploying it in your council’s engagement work, do keep us posted about examples of where it has worked. The email address is: media.office@local.gov.uk

We are also keen to get feedback about the guide, and to answer specific questions about the content. For queries of this kind please contact The Campaign Company: info@thecampaigncompany.co.uk

For more information about the content of this guide, the Asset Library contains a Glossary, explaining all the terms used, and a list of documents for Further Reading.