

The Connected Society

A policy toolkit for local engagement in the public realm

Research Briefing

This research briefing provides the key points and recommendations of the Localis policy toolkit *The Connected Society*. Scan the QR code below for a full report download:



Introduction

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the context of a clear national mandate for levelling up, public organisations and councils across the political spectrum are waking up to the idea that there is a great deal more they can do in partnership with residents and communities. **Kensington & Chelsea Council** is looking to make this idea their modus operandi. Working to understand, internalise and practice engagement towards genuine participation is crucial in achieving this agenda. If enabled and given the wherewithal, citizens can become informal local policymakers, deciding on, and taking control of their own lives in relation to the public domain – putting their unique local expertise to great use.

Policy toolkit

The Connected Society is a policy toolkit, designed to provide actions and policy options that councils can take to enhance engagement, based on lessons learned from Kensington and Chelsea Council. The toolkit is a synthesis of the following research methodologies:

- A review of relevant policy, strategy and internal mechanisms at **Kensington & Chelsea Council** and elsewhere.
- An extensive series of interviews and a roundtable discussion with both internal staff members at **Kensington & Chelsea Council** and external experts on matters of consultation, engagement and public participation.
- An analysis of relevant discourse concerning consultation, engagement and public participation at the local level and the relationship between engagement, local identity, policymaking, and the public realm.

Key points: Understanding, internalising and practicing public engagement

Understanding

- When approaching consultation and engagement at the local level, with honest intentions of transcending tokenism and moving towards toward genuine participation, it is important to understand the nature of public engagement.
- Under objective three of the Levelling Up white paper, there is the goal of restoring “...a sense of community, local pride and belonging”. This is the framework within which local government must now function when approaching levelling up at the local level, particularly when invoking a sense of pride or local identity.

- It is important to draw attention to the emotional nature of place pride and how restoring it is ultimately a negotiation of pride and shame – they are dialectical at the local level, co-dependent on each other for visibility.
- Functioning narrowly on pride alone leaves too much room for interpretation and, if not the product of a shared local vision, rather than the basis on which one is initially built, risks becoming inherently suspect to swathes of a local population.
- Shame and its associated emotions are arguably a more effective basis on which to pursue engagement and subsequent policy. Yet, there is rarely an explicit engagement with how these and other emotions factor into the local policymaking process.
- There are three distinct typologies to engagements at the local level.
 - **Reactive:** engaging in response to complaints or external pressures. Reactive interactions are inevitable, and it is the nature of how they are responded to that is key to optimising all interactions to be more rewarding.
 - **Directive:** engaging residents with pre or semi-determined outcomes. The parameters of pre- or semi-determined outcomes should be open to public scrutiny and debate, particularly on matters that directly affect certain residents.
 - **Proactive:** strategic engagements to pre-empt local issues and develop better policy. Despite the inevitable co-habitation of all three typologies, **embedded proactivity** is the ideal to be striven towards – as this is most conducive to having citizens and communities become active participants in local politics.
- Comprehensive improvements to the public realm and local centres are a critical part of placemaking policy in the current context. These improvements should be directed by engagement activity that is not afraid to strike an emotional connection between a local authority and residents on more complex, difficult matters.

Internalising

- Local authorities must internalise public engagement and its teachings to ensure that the views and insights gained from engagements are well-reflected in a council's priorities and day-to-day functionality.
- Making commitments and having them publicly available is arguably the first step required for any engagement strategy; a scaffolding that can be pointed towards when intentions will inevitably be questioned. Commitments should be in a similar vein to the following;
 - a **relational approach** to governance;
 - strong **networking and communication systems**;
 - dedication to **building capacity**;
 - a **willingness to cede some power and control**, and
 - an **organisational culture that is engaged and facilitative**.
- Being mindful of and managing relationships is key for a local authority looking to internalise the views of residents.
- Ensuring that ongoing engagements are relational in scope, with open-ended, strategic channels of communication, allows for a shared vision of placemaking to be negotiated and developed – whether in relation to specific issues or the broader local area.
- Engagement programmes are going to produce a wide range of views. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse findings before they can be absorbed and internalised to produce results.
- Analysing and interpreting the data produced by consultations requires care and varying levels of expertise. It is important that a local authority is confident in the ability and access to skills to be able to do this and meet public expectations of results.
- Embedding a relational approach when internalising engagements allows for local priorities to be teased out. These priorities are also likely to be of higher quality and more amenable to the

wider local population – as they are result of patterns of engagement and joint adaptation between a local authority and those engaged.

Practising

- The policy and practice of engagements is arguably where a local authority is most immediately present in its residents' lives. Understanding who participates, modes of participation, trust and relationships, and communication are essential to improving the practice of engagements and subsequent policy that arises out of each process.
- It is useful for a local authority to categorise potential audiences for engagements into either **latent, aware, or active 'publics'** based upon their communication behaviour.
- This allows for a better idea of how engaged residents are as a snapshot, and better reveal what strategy and action can be developed to encourage a more populous active public.
- To prevent engagement activity becoming doomed as a minority sport, it is important for local authorities to make it easier for as many people in the borough to participate that fits into their everyday lives.
- In practice, public participation in policymaking typically fits under three modes – **in-person, digital, and hybridised**. Councillors, officers, and practitioners will need to adopt a range of modes and practices to suit specific local circumstances.
- Allowing people to witness engagement happen in practice is helpful, which necessitates as many direct engagements as possible taking place in well-established local centres and hubs of social activity across the borough.
- Building trust is key to enabling a participatory local democracy. Part of that trust building is for people of the borough to see themselves reflected in the political process, beyond just electoral representation.
- Striking an emotional connection and not shying away from more unconventional ways of engaging residents supplements more traditional methods of data collection, eventually seeing all working toward a more humane view of the borough and its issues that is rooted in bottom-up engagements.
- Without good, well-managed channels of communication, there is a risk that linkages will not be made between engagements and results and residents may begin to become disillusioned with the process due to feeling out of the loop.
- **Collaborative communication** ought to be the centralised approach. This communication frame encourages a more contextualised engagement process that is conducive to building relationships and open, ongoing dialogue between a local authority and its residents.

Policy options summary

Understanding

- Design consultations to identify areas which residents feel are points of shame for the borough.
- Build an understanding of different types of interaction – reactive, directive and proactive – into council engagement strategy and staff training.
- Ensure that public engagement makes clear to residents participating what stage of policy formulation they are informing, with a particular focus on engagement at the earliest possible stage.
- Regularly review policy ‘redlines’ for engagement with an emphasis on reduction and resident negotiation wherever possible.
- Form cross-departmental working groups for individual regeneration projects that can be accountable for ensuring consultation results relating to the public realm are integrated across the multifaceted action involved in development.

Internalising

- Ensure that engagement events are held at familiar and accessible locations to target communities.
- Build mechanisms into the policy approval process that depend on local consultation being carried out.
- Ensure that all consultations are preceded by a review of previous engagement exercises to check that the question being asked is new to the target audience.
- Dedicate staff time and resources to understanding and minimising ‘consultation fatigue’ by taking a holistic look at the consultation timeline of all policies and ensuring that communities are being spoken to in the most efficient and least repetitive manner.
- Ensure that the results of all consultations are specifically connected to policy outcomes in documents which are internally and externally available.
- Use examples of consultations and how their results are reflected in policy and the built environment as training materials to bring all staff on board with the idea of engagement as necessary to effective placemaking.
- Establish and support cross-departmental working groups to track ongoing engagements and their results.
- Create accountability mechanisms and regular reviews to ensure that trends and themes identified across engagements are monitored and reflected in policy.

Practising

- Build into consultation and engagement strategy clear explanations of what methods are to be used and how each method will effectively target different communities.
- Engage in ‘tactical oversampling’ of hard-to-reach communities to ensure that consultations are genuinely representative.
- Visualise and – where possible – quantify the balance between online and in-person consultations, as part of external communications on wider engagements.
- Continuously develop and expand online engagement tools to maximise the accessibility and clarity of information on where and how residents can influence local government policy and function.
- Provide opportunities beyond issue-by-issue consultation for residents to air frustrations or grievances with local process and policymaking.
- Publish and widely communicate the results of consultations and wider engagement activity and how they have been taken forward in policy.
- Ensure that language used is accessible as possible, avoiding the abstract where possible, and use language familiar to residents.