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Collaboration, Co-curation, Co-design and Co-production: Achieving Common Ground through Engagement and Consultation in Planning and Development

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Abstract

Revisions to planning policy and regulation have made clear an ambition to place community at the heart of planning, development and improving neighbourhoods.

Fast forward to 2018 and the number of legal challenges by communities who feel that their right to be consulted was not sufficiently considered is increasing; crowd-funding to help those challenges reach traction is not uncommon; the number of individuals and organisations objecting to statutory planning consultations shows no sign of abating, and the sustained campaign to protect land from development – even when it is not protected, considered to be of high value, or even used by the community seeking to protect it – continues.

This paper considers the challenges faced by consultors as they seek to deliver housing numbers without compromising on viability, quality design and spaces and open spaces – as well as ensuring through *best practice* that those who would wish to have their voice listened to are given the opportunity to be involved in the process.

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Results Communications has been working nationwide since 2008 in the public and private sectors, developing and delivering strategic stakeholder engagement, stakeholder management and consultation communications services. She is an Associate of The Consultation Institute and sits on its Planning Working Group.

Introduction

Successive governments have failed to ensure housing supply matches demand. After a long time of being out of the spotlight, the issue is now firmly front and centre of politician, industry and community alike.

Local Authorities have nervously published figures demonstrating a lack of supply to justify refusing planning applications which would otherwise deliver substantial numbers, or at the very least make a small dent in targets. Many of these applications progress to Appeal situations, and quite often is the cause of animosity between applicant and objector, neighbours with different viewpoints, and landowner and community.

But through a more cohesive approach, by capturing the principles of collaboration, co-working and co-operation, could a Common Ground be identified?

This paper explores the current situation and provides guidance to the planning and development sector on how, by applying best practice and looking beyond the industry, the aspirational Co-Design, Co-Curation and Collaboration principles which stood out as the key take-aways from last week's inaugural Beta Housing Conference in Manchester.

Section One discusses the current situation and the challenges it presents to consultors and consultees.

Section Two explores what constitutes engagement and consultation, and analyses where the industry could be better,

Section Three reflects on how it could implement best practice to achieve its aspirations.

Section One - The Current Situation

England is under pressure. On the one hand, there is a quoted government need for 300,000 new homes to be built each year. On the other hand there is a demand from government and community to protect our green spaces, to not allow developed areas to encroach on the greenbelt, and to ensure that where brownfield sites are undeveloped, that these are built out first.

Both pressures highlight immediate problems. Depending on your source, there is – or isn't – a shortage of housing. As a consultant for public and private sector clients I hear first-hand the challenge presented in seeking to bring land forward at the required rate to meet – or even mitigate – the acute shortfall in housing delivery over subsequent years. As a consultant of communities, I also hear first-hand that as 'there are plenty of properties on the market' there is no housing need, and that houses simply are 'not needed here' ['here' being where they live, or where they have an interest in or may be impacted by a proposed development].

A Government Briefing Paper, *Tackling the under-supply of housing in England* (#07671, 31 May 2018), identified cross-party consensus around the long-term under-supply of housing and the need to address this, there is no such agreement in communities.

Box 1: Manifesto commitments General Election 2017

Conservative Party: A commitment to meet the 2015 commitment to deliver a million homes by the end of 2020 and deliver half a million more by the end of 2022. The Manifesto referred to the implementation of proposals in the Housing White Paper (February 2017).

Labour Party: A commitment to invest to build over one million new homes over the Parliament. By the end of the Parliament councils and housing associations would be building at least 100,000 homes a year.

Liberal Democrats: A commitment to build 300,000 homes per year by 2022.

Green Party: A commitment to build affordable, zero carbon homes, including 100,000 social rented homes each year by 2022.

UKIP: A focus on factory-build modular homes which, together with a traditional home building programme "could build another one million homes by 2022."

In Manchester, where the inaugural Beta Housing Conference took place last week (12 July 2018), communities and politicians and other stakeholders are awaiting publication of the second draft of the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework, which is expected to set out the development targets for the ten local authorities which make up the region. Included within this document – which has already been delayed – will also be housing targets. The last version included a target of 227,000 new homes, as well as a raft of industrial, commercial and education development.

Just down the road, Warrington is trying to address an acute housing shortfall – the result of sustained under-supply and once which has left the authority in need of over a thousand new units per year for the next 20 years. There, the local authority is also being challenged by local communities – stakeholders and consultees – over the allocation of land regarded as 'the last green space in North Warrington'.

The common denominator between these two communities and different local authority areas, is that the community is at odds with what the government (central and local) and industry is trying to achieve.

People want decent homes to live in; homes which are affordable, attractive and designed to an acceptable quality, with sufficient space standards internally, and providing quality and usable living spaces externally, in vibrant places within thriving communities and accessible rich open space. They want safe neighbourhoods, with pedestrians prioritised over wheeled traffic, they want parking (and from experience visible from their home. They want integrated play areas that are safe and overlooked without intrusion on those without young family members. They want homes and neighbourhoods where they grew up so they don't have to move away to another neighbourhood, village, town or city to find a home of the right size, for the right price, with access to the right facilities – but they don't want the neighbourhood they grew up in expanded so it becomes a town instead of a village, or green spaces they played on as children built out to provide new homes for current and future generations (even though they haven't used it in years).

What they want is in accord with landowners, planning applicants and developers. Mostly.

The disconnect occurs when development proposals are publicised for land the community believes is land which is publicly-owned, protected, or at the very least, used by someone without the permission of the land-owner to justify an indignant challenge at engagement/consultation stage.

The issue is exacerbated when communities are basing their facts on mis-truths, misperception or out of date policy. The situation is not helped when industry embraces opportunities for involving and engaging communities, only to be faced with scepticism, mistrust, apathy and obstruction.

Nor is it helped when years of hurt caused by developers and consultants still taint the 'new world' of involving, engaging and consulting stakeholders and communities, and of stakeholders and communities, shaping, informing and influencing change and development.

Section Two – Engagement vs Consultation (and what is industry missing?)

One of the key take-aways from the Beta Housing Conference was the discussion around one of the comments made by designer **Wayne Hemingway, Founder of Hemingway Design and a trustee board member of Design Council CABE**. As only Wayne can, he divided the room when he talked about how, after engaging and consulting, the feedback was clearly not reflective of the expected comment and information (based on the demographics), the engagement process was re-opened to include a previously dis-engaged group and thus 'skewing' (in some's opinion) the feedback. (In reality, the feedback from each group proved as useful as the other and informed the design and iterations of the design development to achieve a better solution.)

His comment, and the reaction it caused, spoke volumes about the relationship between engagement and consultation, and the difference between the two, and how they sit within the consultor's toolkit.

Like many professions, consultation and the wider concept of public engagement comes with its own terminology, and this inevitably leads to uncertainty of expectation. There is also a risk that the use of a specific phrase or term can be interpreted by critics as an attempt to appear to be doing one thing while carrying out something entirely different.

Engagement

Actions and processes taken or undertaken to establish effective relationships with individuals or groups so that more specific interactions can then take place.

Consultation

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

In this context, *Consultation* appropriately sits below *Engagement* simply because the latter cannot be effective without the former. What needs to be understood by consultees is that engagement or consultation is not a vote or a referendum, and that while the majority may object to a development proposal, it does not necessarily mean that proposal will be shelved.

Nor is engagement and consultation a guarantee that where consultees provide comment and feedback with alternative solutions, land sites or density, their suggestions will be implemented.

Consultors should ensure that they are open to consultors' preconceptions that they are engaging in a vote, and that what they say will be listened to, and guide consultees accordingly – and ensure they are clear about what is and isn't subject to influence and amendment. For a Common Ground to be achieved, consultors must be open-minded to be influenced, and where appropriate effect change between pre-application consultation and the submission of the planning application.

The Beta Housing Conference in Manchester was not a lesson in engagement and consultation, but what the 11 speakers shared was a common language of cohesion, collaboration, co-working and co-design. A meeting of minds to achieve shared and disparate aspirations.

In short, a 'community first' approach.

Wayne Hemingway endorsed the idea of the looking beyond one's sector for best practice.

Max Farrell, Senior Partner of Farrells Architects displayed his Ten Principles for Growing Communities – and led with *pro-actively engage with communities from the outset* (note how he understands that engagement has to be at the forefront, rather than consultation).

Steve Sheen of One Manchester, set out his vision for a unified community, deliverable through strategy and partnerships.

Partnerships. **Katy Lock, Projects and Policy Manager at the Town & Country Planning Association** further endorsed this ideal through the concept of development being around 'the right land in the right place at the right price' and ensuring community involvement is at its heart.

Jennie Coombs, Head of Affordable Housing at Be First, talked about 'no-one left behind', in the the regeneration company's context of providing accessible affordable housing.

It's a concept that fits with engagement and consultation. Done properly, by the right people, in the right location, at the right time, with the right information, no-one gets left behind. Everyone who wants to have the opportunity to be involved can be involved. They can engage and be engaged. They can be consulted, and they can inform and influence.

Overcoming apathy and scepticism requires a concerted effort by industry and community to ensure that those whose voices are not heard immediately are audible during the engagement and consultation activity. This is achievable through the collaboration and co-working principles, which align perfectly with The Consultation Institute's principle of Co-Production. Everybody has their own phrases and terms for describing how they bring others in to achieve a better outcome, benefit from another's knowledge, but in the end this 'working together' comes down to one thing: engagement. Once the relationships are in place who knows what can be achieved?

Section Three – Recommendations

The planning and development sector is as guilty as others of navel-gazing. Industry can learn from experience elsewhere. At the end of June, delegates to the Consultation and Stakeholder Engagement for Infrastructure Conference in London heard about how the construction sector could learn from the health sector. Not so long ago, the health sector was held up as an example of how not to engage and consult; quite the opposite now.

The sector is recognised for its wealth of professionals, all of whom bring their own specific knowledge, experience and expertise to the betterment of projects they deliver.

The Engagement and Consultation toolkit is wide-ranging, and the Institute provides a range of courses and teaching tools to ensure the planning and development sector is best-equipped when embarking on involvement activities.

Top five recommendations:

1. Assess your community relations

(And those of your client). Every promotor has years of relationships with communities, and a history within the planning department. Experience has proven that relationships evolve in good and bad times, and the relationship you have during your current proposal will depend, to an extent, on what has gone before.

2. Consider your resources

Do you have the right skills within your team, or is training required to ensure you are not exposed to risk and legal challenge? Credibility will be won and lost on the team you have fronting your proposal – and if they are there when consultees expect them to be, with answers to their questions

3. Consider independence

An independent voice in engagement and consultation – particularly where the scheme is contentious or the subject of a long and/or acrimonious relationship with the community – can improve your credibility

4. Assess your team

Ensuring you have the right team in place is fundamental to the success or failure of engagement and consultation activity. Instructing your internal Sales & Marketing team to consult with a community clearly against a development proposal, or sending your PR Manager to a public meeting about a planning application will leave you open to risk and legal challenge

5. Working with other Advisers and consultancies

The planning and development sector is familiar with the need to sub-contract to specialist consultancies, and this is as applicable to Engagement and Consultation communications as it is to the more technical disciplines.

Closing Note

Beta Housing 2018 was organised by [Beta Events](#) to bring together design and construction professional to discuss and share ideas on exemplary approaches to the development of place. Hosted at the architecturally stunning Bridgewater Hall on Thursday 12 July, BETA Housing Manchester brought together some of the most influential voices to provide an insightful and engaging discussion on residential development across the North West.

Combining themed technical briefings and presentations, panel discussions, break-out sessions and an exhibition zone, the event was the first in a series of three to be hosted to bring together key stakeholders, design leaders, developers and the supply chain to discuss the future of the UK's communities and share best practice and innovation from the sector.

The day-long event brought together seasoned professionals from design, planning and engineering, all keen to explore the challenge of meeting the required housing numbers while achieving commercial viability, providing high quality living space, vibrant places, thriving communities and rich public open space.

Chair and Speakers

Nicholas Duffin, Programme Director, [The Consultation Institute](#) (Chair)

Wayne Hemingway, Chair Chairman at CABE and Founder of [Hemingway Design](#)

Dave Rolinson, Chairman and Planning Director, [Spawforths](#)

Steve Sheen, Housing Strategy and Partnerships Manager, [Manchester City Council](#)

Max Farrell Senior Partner at [Farrells](#)

Katy Lock, Policy Manager at Garden Cities and New Towns, [Town and Country Planning Association](#)

Annalie Riches, Director, [Mikhail Riches](#)

Dave Power, Chief Executive, [One Manchester](#)

Jennie Coombs, Head of Affordable Housing, [Be First Regeneration](#)

Lee Burrell, Development Director, [Blackpool Housing Company](#)

Matthew Linegar, Head of Building Systems, [Stora Enso](#)

Charlotte Markey, Head of Strategic Partnerships and PR, [Green Blue Urban](#)

Beta Housing closed with the unveiling of the winners of the Beta Event's Macro to Micro Architecture and Design Competition, which set two challenges, inviting entrants to imagine a new paradigm of city and housing for the 21st century. To view the entries and find out more about the competition visit <https://betaevents.co.uk/competitions/> .

(Competition Jury: Adam Vickers, Managing Director at Squareyard Landscape Architecture; Wayne Hemingway, Chairman at CABE and Founder of Hemingway Design; Max Farrell Senior Partner at Farrells; Lisa Kinch; Associate Architect at Farrells and Lecturer at Manchester School of Architecture; Katy Lock, Policy Manager at Garden Cities and New Towns, Town and Country Planning Association; Steve Sheen, Housing Strategy and Partnerships Manager at Manchester City Council; and Andrea Verenini, Founder, Eleven.)