



## **The State of Community Engagement & Participation Across Authorities in England RESEARCH METHOD STATEMENT**

### **BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH**

Troy Planning + Design and the University of Manchester (The Department of Planning and Environmental Management) are collaborating on a cutting edge research project into the level of community engagement and participation in planning matters across England. This research is perhaps the first of its kind to investigate community engagement in planning from the public sector's perspective, across the whole of England in the 21st century.

As a full service town planning and urban design consultancy, Troy Planning + Design works on a wide range of projects including new town proposals and preparing local plans on behalf of planning authorities, to working with local communities on neighbourhood plans, and with landowners on planning applications and masterplans across England. Throughout the projects the company works on, effective community engagement and participation varies considerably between authorities. Often the focus of community engagement and participation is on the need to simply comply with the minimum planning consultation requirements set by Central Government.

There appears to be a deficiency of research to gauge the current state in the effectiveness of community engagement and participation methods applied by authorities, and there is an urgent need to undertake an in-depth research project to ascertain what is happening 'on the ground' in authorities (including town and parish councils, local authorities and combined authorities, and their planning departments) across England. It is critical that this is understood for a number of reasons including:

- Recognising the resource constraints in planning departments, are there sufficient budgets being set aside for authority planners and those involved in planning activities to engage effectively?
- Are the methods being used appropriate for the scale of and complexity of the issues?
- What does the picture look like across authorities and their planning services?
  - Planning policy (local plan making)
  - Development management (planning applications and appeals)
  - Neighbourhood planning (community led planning)
  - Economic development / regeneration
  - Housing
- What are the barriers to deploying more effective community engagement?

In response to a perceived 'democratic deficit' in decision-making, the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act introduced the requirement for a statutory Statement of Community Involvement by local planning authorities. The 2011 Localism Act introduced neighbourhood planning powers for community groups. The rapid growth of neighbourhood planning, with over 730 approved by

referendum and over 2,600 in production as of June 2019, also arguably indicates a widespread desire for involvement amongst the public themselves.

The Government’s 2018 changes to the National Planning Policy Framework include new expectations for community engagement and participation in the planning process including introducing the expectation that plans should use digital tools to assist consultation and presentation of policies. This research will include a look at whether technology and digital tools are currently being used by authorities for community engagement, how they are being used and ask whether they are effective. It will also ask whether authorities consider that the use of more technology and digital tools would help in making community engagement more effective.

**WHAT OPPORTUNITIES EXIST?**

Requirements and opportunities for community involvement exist across and differ between three main arenas of planning practice. Whilst the focus of this research is on these key areas of planning, we acknowledge that the fields of economic development / regeneration and housing often overlap with planning and the research will ensure that this is captured as necessary:

PLAN-MAKING	DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT	NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING
<p>All planning authorities in England must publish a ‘Statement of Community Involvement’ setting out how they will engage the community in planning. For a local plan the authority must engage early, consulting on ‘Issues and Options’ and ‘Preferred Options’ reports.</p> <p>There is a statutory requirement to publish a draft ‘Regulation 18’ local plan and consult on this before final publication. All concerned parties can submit representations to the ‘Pre-Submission’ local plan (Regulation 19) only on the ‘soundness’ and legal compliance of the local plan.</p>	<p>All planning applications must be advertised through a combination of site notices, neighbour notification, newspaper advertisements and online. The public then have 21 days to view the application and write to the local planning authority with their concern. The public also often have speaking rights at Planning Committees where they are able to communicate their views to councillors directly.</p> <p>Developers are encouraged to consult prior to application, although this is non-statutory.</p>	<p>The 2011 Localism Act granted parish and town councils the (optional) ability to produce neighbourhood development plans and neighbourhood development orders. In unparished areas, community groups can apply to designate neighbourhood areas and form a neighbourhood forum of at least 21 people who represent the area.</p> <p>Neighbourhood plans can draw up policies for development and use of land in their designated area. These must have appropriate regard to national planning policy and must be in general conformity with the strategic policies of the development plan in force if they are to meet the basic conditions.</p> <p>Neighbourhood development plans are adopted after an independent examination and public referendum. Local authorities have a duty to support neighbourhood plan production, although they are provided no extra resources to do so.</p>

Despite the Government’s requirements and statutory responsibilities for authorities, there are signs that current practice is not always delivering to the ‘collaborative’, democratic ideals advocated by Government. In many instances the potential for genuine community engagement and collaboration in the planning process is overshadowed by the interests of economic growth and efficiency. This has reduced participation to little more than a ‘tick-box’ exercise, conducted in a disinterested manner during a small window of opportunity, rather than an ongoing process of engaged dialogue and participation.

## THE RESEARCH

### Questions, aims and objectives

With this in mind, we wish to establish how 'community engagement and participation' in planning is perceived, what current practice exists, what resources and budgets are allocated to community engagement and participation by authorities and ultimately how could the process and resources be improved. In the face of what is potentially a bleak prognosis, are there success stories going uncelebrated, and what room exists for these to be scaled up?

The International Association for Public Participation sees Community Engagement and Participation as a spectrum (see figure 1). A key question is, what is the role of the authority staff involved in planning matters in this process, and where do most staff fall on this spectrum?

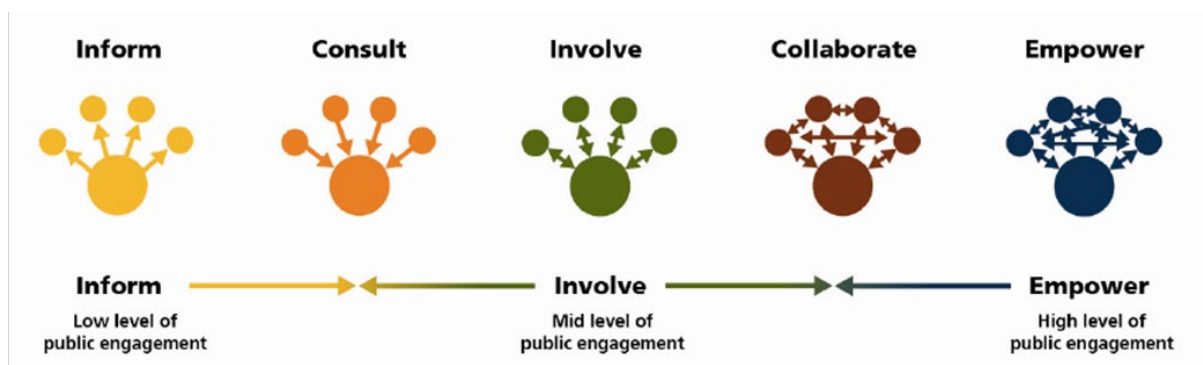


Figure 1 - Spectrum of Community Engagement and Participation as envisaged by the International Association for Public Participation

While there are many ways in which these questions could be answered, our focus will be on the perspective of those working within authorities on planning matters. We aim to understand what authorities understand the purpose of community engagement and participation to be, how existing and potential approaches and tools for participation are perceived, and what the barriers and routes to making these more effective might be. This will span neighbourhood planning, development management and planning policy.

It is envisaged that the issues and opportunities for engagement and participation will vary between these areas of planning. It is also likely that perceptions differ between (and amongst) planning officers, management and elected members, and our research therefore needs to account for this nuance.

We will conduct a survey of authorities in England. A questionnaire will be sent out via email, publicised via social media, and shared on the web. If respondents are willing, this might be followed by more detailed case study research around best practice and the most effective and innovative engagement stories. At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of context. The principal focus of the research is the perspective of authorities, however if someone is not a planner working for an authority (within the past 12 months) and would like to provide input, they can still take the survey.

As important as the findings themselves is their communication to relevant stakeholders. These include but are not limited to authorities, developers, neighbourhood planning groups and community groups beyond the 'usual suspects'. Our research will inform the publication of a report to stimulate conversation about effective and innovative community engagement and participation in planning, and opportunities for its implementation in practice. This will be circulated to stakeholders and provide the basis for a series of two forums to be held in London and Manchester and in additional locations as required. In the spirit of positive participation, we hope that this will facilitate *ongoing*

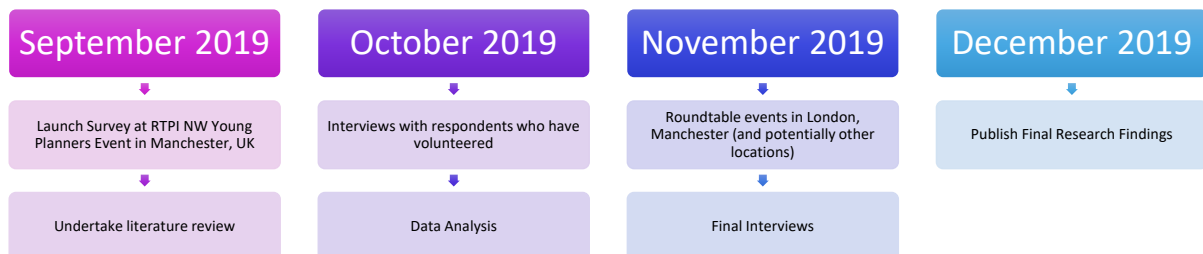
dialogue on effective community engagement practice. It is of value for authorities to share their experiences, as this can encourage learning from best practice, inform policy, set a precedent for developers, and enable diverse stakeholder (including local community) understanding of where opportunities do and should lie.

Therefore, the project seeks to meet a number of key aims:

1. Investigate authorities' attitudes towards the principle of community engagement and participation.
2. Investigate authorities' perceptions of the effectiveness and appropriateness of current approaches and tools for engagement and participation.
3. Investigate how authorities consider existing tools for engagement and participation could be improved.
4. Investigate the barriers to improving the current state of community engagement and participation.
5. Investigate the resources and budgets currently used for community engagement and participation by authorities for planning, and the costs of different engagement levels and techniques.
6. Communicate these findings to relevant stakeholders, including but not limited to authorities, policy makers, developers and community groups, to generate national best practice, and influence planning practice guidance revision in the future.
7. Identify opportunities for future collaboration and areas for further research. This could include researching effective planning engagement practices from countries outside of England.

## Timetable

The research is programmed to take place over the course of 2019 with the key stages set out below.



## WHO WE ARE

**Troy Planning + Design** is a professional planning consultancy specialising in strategic and community planning, working on a wide range of public and private sector planning, development, and design related assignments across the UK, Europe and the USA.

**The Department of Planning and Environmental Management at the University of Manchester** is one of the leading RTPi-accredited planning schools in the UK. It brings a multi-disciplinary approach to spatial planning, environmental management, real estate and urban design with numerous connections across discipline boundaries with the natural sciences, social sciences and arts. Its research focuses primarily around the making of future cities – embracing issues such as spatial analysis, urban governance and sustainability and aspiring to help create better cities and regions by critically analysing and helping shape better policies for promoting more equitable and more sustainable places for future generations.