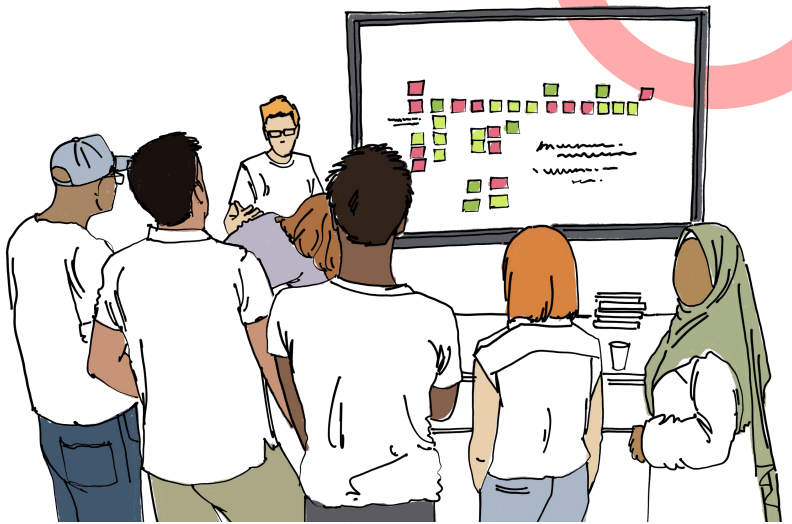
Supporting London Boroughs Engagement Project: The Learning Partnership

Final Report by Neighbourly Lab

May 2024



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About the Community Engagement Programme

In Spring 2023, 13 London Boroughs received grants from the GLA (coordinated by London Councils) to help them better connect with local communities and give voice to issues that matter. This funding and approach is essential, as many Londoners targeted through the grants face chronic challenges post pandemic and in the face of the Cost of Living crisis. The community-led insights from these projects form a valuable tool for key Decision Makers as they shape London's recovery from these ongoing crises.

Each grantee funded project has been different, working with diverse resident groups and partners on the ground. Each Borough has brought its own unique ways of working, experiences and engagement skills with residents. As of April 2024, the majority of projects reached their official close with some continuing until July 2024. However, as this report sets out, the impact and legacies of the different projects continue, outlasting the grant-giving cycle.

During the grant cycle, London Boroughs have aimed to:

- Diversify the resident groups with whom they are engaging
- Try out and reflect on new or existing engagement techniques
- Learn and share with other Boroughs carrying out community engagement
- Reflect and use what is known from Covid's community response to support community resilience in the face of the Cost of Living crisis

About the Learning Partnership

In support of this work, London Councils brought in Neighbourly Lab as the Learning Partner to help maximise grantee success on this "Supporting London Boroughs' Engagement Project". Our primary objectives have been to:

- Support the 13 London boroughs grantees to help them to meet the specified aims set out in their proposals by providing consultation and building a Community of Learning so grantees can benefit from others' experiences and know how
- Understand/measure the impact of these community engagement projects with a view to what works and what could be scalable in the long-term
- Identify areas of emerging practice, common ways of working, future opportunities for engagement and recommend how to share and promote this good practice across all London boroughs

This included a series of Action Learning workshops to bring all the grantees together to share learnings and troubleshoot emerging challenges, ethnographic visits by the Neighbourly Lab team to the projects themselves to see them in action and understand their community impact first-hand, as well as general 121 sessions with grantees to support wherever possible. It was a unique opportunity to bring together thematically diverse projects (from co-designing council services with sanctuary seekers, to improving the experiences of deaf and hard of hearing communities, to developing a localised participatory budgeting process from scratch) and explore the linkages that tied them together.

What has the grantee experience looked like?

As the Learning Partner for this grant, our reflections on the overall grant-giving process -and the implementation of projects by councils- are extremely positive. In a landscape typically defined by short, sharp community engagements based around broader strategic objectives, it has been a privilege to work with councils afforded the time and flexibility to deliver genuinely innovative engagement projects. The grant intentionally created a 'learn by doing' experience for grantees. They have been encouraged to trial new methods, engage with new communities and pursue innovation that would otherwise be difficult alongside the demands of their regular work. They have also been encouraged to reflect on their practice and experiences, and to pivot as necessary to meet real community needs and build on existing assets.

Grantees particularly benefited from focusing on specific communities or groups of residents and the importance of maintaining a clear and targeted approach was a collective learning. Grantees also inevitably ran into various challenges, including the slowness of wider council systems and policies, the difficulty of reimbursement, and the struggle to engage with underrepresented and/or historically excluded groups. All these challenges mirror the novelty and ambition of the projects, as well as the current climate (post-Covid and the Cost of Living), and they were creatively solved or navigated. Despite it being early days in the life span of community work, legacies are already beginning to emerge within communities and the councils themselves. Taken together, these legacies represent a broader revisioning of future engagement brought about this grant, which has given councils the evidence-base and opportunity to continue driving forward a different approach to community engagement. We hope that the insights from the Learning Partnership provide a foundation for future work in this mould across London's diverse communities.

What has the grantee experience looked like?

The below chart offers a high-level picture of how grantees experienced delivering projects within this grant life cycle and the overall legacies and outcomes generated.

Implementing projects differently

Flexible and patient funding enabled grantees to implement unique projects that engaged communities in a new way. Projects benefitted from focusing on specific communities and working from a tight plan whilst being ready to flex to inevitable and unexpected changes.

Project challenges surface

Implementing projects within this new landscape of engagement also inevitably created challenges like:

-How to engage certain underrepresented groups and build trust
-How to reimburse fairly and efficiently
-How to work across internal council silos

As challenges are overcome legacies begin to emerge

Grantees came through these challenges to deliver projects with long-lasting impact and emerging legacies:

Emerging grant legacies

- Winning more funding to invest in communities
- Cross-council support for innovative approaches
- New and embedded engagement skills
- Shifted council relationships with communities

New vision of engagement established

Grantees and their wider council teams, now have the evidence-base to map out and drive forward future visions of genuine community engagement.

1. Understanding Impact

The impact of the grantees' projects on communities

The impact that projects have had within communities is **varied and wide-reaching**. In this context, we define impact according **to the changes that each project brought about in the lives of residents and communities.** This includes **intended and unintended impacts** because many projects produced a ripple-like effect, where efforts to provide specific support towards one community led to other positive offshoots. As demonstrated later in the report, these processes in turn impacted the grantees themselves and the ways that their councils approach community engagement. We have distilled this impact into **four key themes** below that surfaced most powerfully during the grant period. In this section we explore each of these themes in more depth.

Impact on communities

- New communities engaged
- Increased Inclusivity and Accessibility
- Strengthened levels of trust
- Longer lasting community connections forged

New communities engaged

Impact on communities

For many grantees the flexibility of the grant funding created the space and time to engage with people from previously lesser heard communities. Their projects created opportunities to deliver sustained and targeted engagement with groups who have been historically disconnected from the day-to-day rhythms of council engagement. Sometimes, this type of engagement took place in a style and setting that councils are otherwise unable to provide (e.g. performance halls and artistic events spaces). This allowed them to develop new relationships within their communities, often in neutral settings, and embed learnings about what works for engagement across different groups.

Providing multilingual services to engage new residents

One council was able to build deeper relationships with communities who do not speak English as a first language by recruiting community interpreters so that they could offer multilingual services. This led to an oversubscription of residents, reflecting the value of multilingual service provision for engaging new communities: *"They feel that we are coming to them and not limiting to people who can speak English. We engaged with people on their turf and in their home language"* (Grantee)

Empowering young people to get involved by offering them genuine autonomy

Another council brought together their borough's youth board and Young Commissioners to convene and make decisions on issues that really matter. Young people were empowered to get involved and learn from each other, gathering different kinds of data to eventually create a COL survey by and for young people that received 100+ responses and fed into the Council's Corporate Management Team decision-making.

Increased Inclusivity and Accessibility

Impact on communities

Inclusivity and Accessibility have been a core focus of many grantees projects and this impact has been clear. Three councils focused on improving services for their Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities as just one example, others focused on Young People, people Seeking Sanctuary, people who identify as having a Disability. They all worked in different ways, but when they baked in participatory methods in their approach, the outcomes were more easily reached.

Creating equality of opportunity for young people with complex needs

"Over the three day music workshop every child was enabled to participate and take part and there was equality across the whole group. Just seeing them all come together and feel that sense of pride was great and the parents reactions to me were, "I have never ever seen my child take part in something like this and perform because people don't think they can"" (Grantee)

Co-designing initiatives with people seeking sanctuary so they meet real needs and aspirations

During one of our ethnographic visits, a resident participating in a project for sanctuary seekers reflected how it was a "*perfect involvement of inclusivity and the power of diversity*". This is partly a result of the co-design processes that many grantees developed in their work - one group of residents described feeling 'seen and heard' properly for the first time.

Strengthened levels of trust

Impact on communities

This grant enabled council staff to work directly with residents, often working together to deliver projects in a way that grantees observed as unique, compared to their usual more fast-paced work. With less focus on specific milestones or strategic council objectives, grantees were able to spend genuine and sustained time with residents, leading to deeper relationships. Although building this trust was rarely easy, with many grantees engaging communities who have historically been let down by the council and hold deep mistrust. Being able to present a project with flexibility in both timeframe and scope was a massive factor in securing the trust of these groups as well as the VCS who played a pivotal role in most projects.

The necessity of shared trust to deliver meaningful outcomes

"The willingness of our community partner and openness of residents to participate and share their experiences with us (as well as placing trust in us to deliver outcomes, when they have often been let down before) was the primary reason the sessions were a success... Since relationships have been built, people from the Deaf community are starting to reach out to council for help they need" (Grantee)

Grantees and residents building relationships by working in partnership using participatory techniques

We observed one council develop meaningful relationships with the Community Researchers (CR) they partnered with for this project. This included using a mapping exercise during a participatory session - asking CRs to draw on a print out map of the borough what areas have special meaning to them and why. This approach sparked conversation and helped everybody to feel comfortable (which is essential for CRs to work effectively).

Longer lasting community connections forged

Impact on communities

Over the course of the last year, both Neighbourly Lab and grantees observed how the projects created environments for residents to connect further with one another. This is essential for longer lasting community resilience. In the below examples, even though they weren't core objectives, we see the longer-lasting impact that projects can have in creating new spaces for residents to visit, meet people and this instance explore their cultural heritage. This again reflects the structure of the grant and the opportunity provided for grantees and communities to shape projects that fit with their identity and aspirations.

Residents (young people in this example) involved in projects learning about new opportunities for community life

"It's a whole new community that they know about and can now participate in [after the project]. A lot of those vulnerable children have not had access to activities that immerse them in their cultural heritage and racial identity - this project allowed them to do that in a safe and welcoming way. And right now we just don't do that at all for children and its bottom of the list. So for them to be able to continue to connect to that through our partner organisation after this project ends is really good". (Grantee)

Bringing people together across lines of difference to deliver something for their community

In one participatory research project delivering co-design with Sanctuary Seekers from around the world, a grantee reflected how inspiring it has been to see *"the deep solidarity that's developed between the group who are often from very different backgrounds".*

The grant has also had a positive short-term impact on the grantees/councils

Crucially, the impact of the grants was two-way. Just as communities experienced positive changes, so too did the grantees themselves. Alongside the longer-term legacies detailed later in the report, the chart below highlights the more immediate impacts of the grants on the ability of councils to engage communities.

It provided some stability amidst widespread funding cuts: *"The funding for most of our work is being looked at due to savings that need to be made across the Council. So we are trying to capitalise on ways to obtain funds for the benefit of the community."* (Grantee)

It created space for experimentation and genuine ideas testing: *"The pot of funding has been very useful to get started on co-creation and to be able to experiment. The group has come up with the projects themselves. Without the grant, we would have been the ones to define the projects as it's considerably less time consuming."* *(Grantee)*

It generated insights to improve service delivery: *"The insights gathered show most residents are unaware of available support and need 'pre-employment advice and support' before they're employment ready. This will help us to develop a service that's better suited to the needs of this target cohort."* (Grantee)

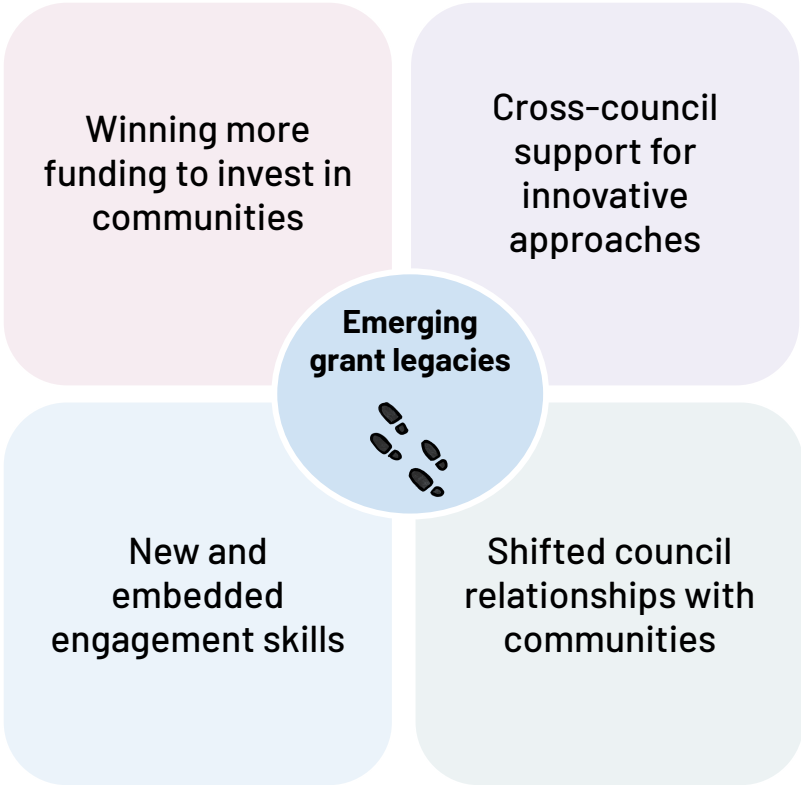
It enabled new relationships within communities: *"Additionally, we now have an established a group of active, influential voices from different communities who we will involve in our engagement work going forward."* (Grantee)

3. Emerging legacies

What legacies are emerging from the grants?

Despite some projects only recently finishing (and others still in full flow), imprints are already emerging on both councils and communities that will outlast the lifecycle of the grant. The most widespread legacies are captured thematically in this section of our report. They highlight how a relatively small pot of community engagement funding can generate innovation and reach that go beyond the sum of its parts. The legacy areas we have identified also signal how best to measure and understand the longer-lasting impact of community engagement.

Most grantees reflected that this style of funding was unique. These unique qualities (flexibility, patience, an openness to fail and learn, and the supportive environment of a peer learning partnership to name just a few) were also what enabled projects to eventually flourish. As a result, in a short time frame grantees have been able to achieve a significant amount to support their respective communities.



Winning more funding to invest in communities

Grant legacy

Several councils have used the success and impact of their grant funding to apply for further funding from within their council. This reflects how a relatively small pot of funding can be used to highlight where support is needed within communities and build a case for council investment. Some grantees said that they characterised this grant as 'seed funding'. This helped to manage community expectations that there was no guarantee it would be longer-term, whilst also communicating to colleagues in the council that this project would ideally use further funding.

"The specific funding was very useful in our early days to get our British Sign Language (BSL) engagement sessions up and running. We have secured 80k a year for the next 3 years from Health Inequalities funding to continue our work and expand it to other communication and information needs" (Grantee)

"The senior director who led elements of our project said actually there is always space to do this for a day a week and even can fund someone coming in a day a week just to continue this engagement" (Grantee)

"We have already asked and received extension of current funding to undergo a longer engagement programme which would include different teams, like adult social care, housing, council tax, benefits, leisure centres and public health, as well as partnering with NHS on a health focused session. The aim of this is to create a shared ownership of this project with colleagues, while raising awareness to the barriers residents face in accessing services" (Grantee)

"We ended up topping up the funding we received with our own funding which shows the investment was really worth it." (Grantee)

Cross-council support for innovative approaches

Grant legacy

As we know effective community engagement by councils cannot take place within just one team. It requires the buy-in and knowledge of multiple teams who each have unique touch points with the communities of their borough. Through this funding, grantees have been able to test new approaches and demonstrate their impact to colleagues to generate their buy in. This has created a wider-reaching mindset shift across councils about the importance of innovative community engagement.

"The things that have really worked we're going to build on. So this funding helped me build evidence to say that this really worked and now the council are going to take it forward. They have put a bid in for London Borough of Culture and I was able to say that building on my project is a thing that a London Borough of Culture ought to be doing" (Grantee)

"The project has enabled us to establish and test some participation related policies, including around reimbursement. These policies and processes will continue to be used by other teams in the council."
(Grantee)

"We're going to use the recommendations from this project for stuff beyond the original scope of the project. There will be service responsibilities for us to take on across the council" (Grantee)

"Accessing this funding has allowed us to pilot new and innovative approaches to community development, using a small participatory budgeting project as a jumping off point to explore our understanding of and approach to embedding community power across the council... We aim to spread the approach across the council. We are exploring how the learning from this project could feed into a participatory budgeting approach with our migration team which could take place following this project in 2024." (Grantee)

New and embedded engagement skills

Grant legacy

This grant created an opportunity to innovate and in doing so allowed council staff to develop new engagement skills. Many grantees reflected that they would not have had the time or resource to learn these skills without this grant. These skills are now being embedded and shared within councils to different colleagues, creating an additional legacy of the grant that stems from its focus towards innovation.

"Our team has learnt new skills, which they can hopefully use in the future and they've also learnt more about different communities in the borough, helping to identify opportunities for closer working." (Grantee)

"The consultant we used this grant funding to hire, put in place in some foundations which since he's left have started to bloom. He set up a council Nextdoor account and trained a CE officer in how to use Nextdoor because she was in charge of setting up our physical meetings with residents. She now uses Nextdoor to advertise them and can make it area based which has been brilliant. And when people comment and stuff she can reply to those comments. We also set up our Whatsapp channel last week. Based on the consultant's research and already have 150 followers." (Grantee)

Without this funding we wouldn't have had the access to UCL ethnographic insights lab as a partner and the opportunity to upskill the rest of the team by shadowing UCL as they interviewed the 'community based experts.' They also helped us learn the value of expert interviews rather than focus groups to help us more clearly understand specific groups. We're sometimes shoehorned into doing our insights work in a really practical way but this has given us time to actually experiment and become more theoretical. (Grantee)

Shifted council relationships with communities

Grant legacy

There has been a resounding consensus that this grant has enabled councils to engage with residents in an entirely new way. A large part of that is having the flexibility and resource to meaningfully involve and empower residents to direct the trajectory of projects. Taking this approach creates trust between the council and residents more broadly, but it also facilitates new relationships on an individual level and encourages residents to get more involved in the activities and issues linked to their place.

"Recruiting community organisers from our target estates has supported us to take a more collaborative approach. Working in partnership with residents has enabled us to demonstrate community buy-in for the project, develop emerging community leaders through community organiser training, and support them to build strong neighbourhood networks. It has enabled the community organisers, as residents of the estates, to develop their community over time, supporting their neighbours to come together to decide how to spend the grant. By enabling the community organisers to hold and develop those connections across the estates, we hope to see a strengthened local community, which will continue to grow and flourish beyond the life of this particular project."
(Grantee)

"We have established a strong group of community researchers, who feel comfortable challenging us on our processes and providing honest feedback. Through the project, researchers have connected with others within and outside of their communities." (Grantee)

"We wanted the conversation to be led by our residents, which we experienced in the 3rd discussion group. It's important to note though that this could be because we had already started building a relationship with residents, so they might have felt more comfortable to be open with us because of this and more encouraged that things might start being actioned."
(Grantee)

4. Challenges, practical learnings, and the ingredients for successful community engagement

Sharing challenges, learnings, and ingredients for success to support future community engagement

By learning-by-doing and being given the time and space to conduct genuinely innovative engagement, our grantees developed and shared a huge amount of learning. A core purpose of the Learning Partnership and the different workshops and engagements that we scheduled to bring grantees together, was to surface and distill this learning. In particular, so that the valuable work carried out by grantees could also have a legacy on the way community engagement work is done across London in the future.

With this mind, the aim of this section is to be as practical as possible. We first condense some of the core challenges that grantees experienced and then dive into the practical tips and ingredients for success, that grantees have shared over the course of their projects. Not all the challenges have been easily solvable (reimbursement and incentivisation continues to create issues, for example) but in tackling these challenges grantees have created and shared a huge amount of learning that could be a useful tool for anyone wanting to do effective community engagement in London.

Some key challenges that surfaced across the course of the Learning Partnership

Project challenges

Throughout the learning partnership, grantees ran into several collective challenges. It is important to briefly set these out in order to further contextualise some of the practical insights and learnings that followed.

Within councils:	Navigating the wider council system	Relying on other colleagues, policies and systems within the council but outside their team was difficult for many grantees
	Resourcing and time	Ensuring time and resource for effective project delivery, on top of a grantees' day job, was a constant challenge
	Capturing and measuring Impact	Understanding what impact grantees could measure, as projects were in their infancy, meant that impact and outputs needed defining
Within communities:	Reimbursement and Incentivisation	Reimbursing residents was challenging because councils lack wider relevant policy guidance and capacity to implement this kind of direct funding
	Engaging underrepresented groups	Some councils initially struggled to engage communities and residents who aren't already plugged in to council services
	The dynamics of group facilitation	For many grantees this was a first go at participatory research and co-design and facilitating these sessions was a learning curve

How grantees have experienced these challenges

Project challenges

Within councils:

Navigating the wider council system

"I've found out from this project if your council doesn't have a structure in place to do something (we don't have a structure in place to do co-production) it becomes very hard. I don't want to be inventing a process. And that's been the toughest part of the whole project, like literally how do you get a colleague in a room to help you navigate these processes?" (Grantee)

Resourcing and time

"We brought in a new colleague to help us with this project during a period of change - someone senior left and their replacement was temporary so didn't want to make big changes. So our new colleague did face some resistance to change and everyone was so busy anyway with their usual day jobs that the project was seen as additional work." (Grantee)

Capturing and measuring Impact

"We would like to learn what is coming out from other boroughs in terms of how they measure success and what we could do differently to understand and measure the impact of our project. Within our relatively small project it feels like a very difficult thing to properly measure and prove the value of." (Grantee)

The implications of these challenges

Project challenges

Within councils:

Navigating the wider council system

- A lack of support from colleagues (either because they were too busy or because the project did not align with wider strategic objectives)
- Snr Leadership were not always fully engaged with the projects at the start. In some instances this was due to a resistance to change and/or innovation
- Projects relied on lots of unwieldy policies and systems that were beyond the team's control

Resourcing and time

- Projects were often carried out in an under resourced team. This challenge was exacerbated by natural churn with staff leaving and others joining.
- Grantees were nearly always delivering their projects on top of their regular day jobs which meant they were stretched and often worked overtime
- Delivering projects that were sensitive to the rhythms of community life also meant working evenings and weekends

Capturing and measuring Impact

- Grantees were concerned that their sample sizes and (often) their focus on qualitative data would not be taken seriously by colleagues and funders
- There was uncertainty about what data points to use given the scope of projects were fluidly changing according to community needs plus limited team capacity
- All grantees wanted to demonstrate their impact but found the relatively short time period of their projects difficult

How grantees have experienced these challenges

Project challenges

Within communities

Reimbursement and Incentivisation

Reimbursement is a challenge. We didn't have a reimbursement policy (we're writing one now). There have been issues with people on Universal Credit not being able to receive reimbursement because it impacts their claims. We try to make a flexible offer including vouchers and time credits but the issue has been making sure that what someone in the council says we can do is actually deliverable." (Grantee)

Engaging underrepresented groups

"We tried to mobilise Facebook groups but when we try to post on the fb group the admin won't approve it. So we have to think about how we engage those admins to understand what content they want on their platforms. Maybe they have not been engaged properly before and don't like the council or want to partner with us. But we will keep trying to develop those relationships." (Grantee)

The dynamics of group facilitation

"Residents have said they had an initial expectation for us to give them information rather than co-design ideas together. My area is co-design and participation but I'd also really like support turning all the insights showing up from our sessions into tangible outcomes and recommendations, so that residents can see the full process and the action we're taking. " (Grantee)

The implications of these challenges

Project challenges

Within councils:

Reimbursement and Incentivisation

- Many grantees struggled to reimburse residents participating in their projects due to a lack of guidance and policy
- They also relied on their finance teams to process payments which could lead to delays and made it difficult to provide updates to residents
- This process also asked for lots of personal information from residents (e.g. bank statements) which some found uncomfortable

Engaging underrepresented groups

- Groups who may have been historically excluded from engagement processes lacked trust in the council and grantees had to work regain this trust
- Some community organisers saw grantees as more hassle than they were worth and preferred to support residents themselves
- For grantees conducting research, some struggled to break down barriers between residents to facilitate meaningful research (e.g. interviews, focus groups)

The dynamics of group facilitation

- Some grantees were conducting participatory research for the first time. This created technical challenges, like how to moderate discussions so that every resident can share their perspective
- Grantees also wrestled with the balance between being facilitators and being resident-led. They wanted residents to drive the sessions, but found residents needed more support and training (and sometimes wanted grantees to lead the session)

The ingredients for successful community engagement (and how to overcome project challenges)

Ingredients for success

By navigating and solving challenges and learning-by-doing, grantees have been able to reflect on some of the key ingredients for a successful, innovative community engagement project, as well as how to overcome some of the previously listed challenges. The rest of the section dives into these ingredients:

Project Management & Approach	Council mechanisms and Culture	Practical engagement tips	Maximising impact of internal & external partners
Starting with a data point	Find allies early on	Trial new venues and spaces	Recruiting external partners can help drive impact
Planning amidst unpredictability	Pick your battles	Use digestible materials	
Focussing on specific groups	Seek out councillor support	Create multiple points of engagement	Work across council silos to build on existing internal work
Stakeholder mapping	Join up engagement and comms work	Take time to intro and explain	

Project Management and Approach

Ingredients for success

Grantees gathered a raft of practical tips about what actually works when it comes to the management and strategic approach of an innovative community engagement project. Not all of these tips will work for every project, but they provide useful insight about the steps grantees took to deliver successful community engagement.

Starting with a data point: Basing project bids and approaches around a specific data point helps provide a clear sense of mission and can generate more buy in at a strategic level. For example, Hackney based their project around a survey finding that there had been "a decline in the proportion of residents agreeing that access to job opportunities are available to everyone equally in Hackney (31% to 24%)", and used the funding to texture this data with qualitative insights.

Planning amidst unpredictability: Most projects developed organically and were resident-led. Although this is much needed, it meant that they also underwent various iterations and shifting timelines. Grantees highlighted that this created practical challenges with resourcing but also more conceptual challenges, like making sure the project team all remain on the same page as the aims and impact of the project organically changed. Grantees addressed these challenges by creating planning for this inevitable unpredictability as best they could, like quickly developing a light-touch project plans and assigning roles and responsibilities (internally and with external partners), as well as regularly forecasting potential crunch points in the project to ensure resources are in place.

Project Management and Approach

Ingredients for success

Focusing on specific groups: This style and size of grant funding is most effective for engaging specific community groups. This helps to move the project forward (for example, by tightening the age range of research participants or the geographic boundaries of the project). It also creates smaller, more achievable targets; the learnings from which can then be applied and scaled to future engagement work.

"If we were to do it again we would just focus on one because engagement has been really challenging across different communities who often have needs that are slightly different but impactful (like online versus offline preferences for sessions) and also different religious holidays affecting participation)". (Grantee)

Stakeholder mapping: It is important to understand the relevant local ecosystem of residents and community organisations as early as possible. However, often pre-existing internal council lists are unwieldy and incomplete and although arduous, a stakeholder mapping process may be required. This may involve identifying and collating all the existing internal lists of e.g. community organisations to create a new and exhaustive list specific to the community the project is focused on.

Council mechanisms and culture

Ingredients for success

Council community engagement is most effective when it runs through the organisation and involves different services. However, not all grantees experienced this organisational culture. This section highlights the tips and tricks learnt by grantees to help navigate wider council mechanisms and bureaucracy to deliver their project.

Find allies in the council early on: Identify key future stakeholders in different departments during the bid writing process and early project stages. This helps build relationships for when the project needs their buy-in further down the line. Introducing colleagues to residents with lived experience is another powerful way to land the importance of the grant and project (see quote).

"We used resident voices (lived experience experts) to get external stakeholders onboard. We have found actually interacting with our Deaf residents has had the most impact on getting colleagues to understand the barriers being faced by our residents." (Grantee)

Pick your battles: Analyse and gauge the most important challenges for your project that rely on other colleagues and focus on achieving those. There is value in letting some internal battles go in order to preserve good relationships with stakeholders who can help influence your project in the future. Ultimately, the most important outcome to work towards with other colleagues is some kind of commitment to work together. As one grantee put it, *"For me if we get any commitment, even if for a year's time, that's a win."*

Council mechanisms and culture

Ingredients for success

Council community engagement is most effective when it runs through the organisation and involves different services. However, not all grantees experienced this organisational culture. This section highlights the tips and tricks learnt by grantees to help navigate wider council mechanisms and bureaucracy to deliver their project.

Seek out councillor support: Several grantees reflected that their projects were really driven forward by the involvement of local councillors. Although this can also create the risk of over-interference, overall this has been highlighted an important factor in boosting the visibility and reach of projects. Councillors have spoken at some project events as well as leveraging their network to connect grantees with important stakeholders.

"We didn't have many issues getting our project through all the systems because the elected leader of our council is really supportive of community engagement work and is forward thinking. Once we got his buy in it gave us a lot of leverage." (Grantee)

Place special emphasis on joining up work between engagement and comms teams: There are lots of council services that different projects rely on to deliver effective work, but the relationship between community engagement teams and comms teams (when they are separate) was highlighted most regularly by grantees, so is worth flagging. This is particularly the case for digital engagement work as it will require close collaboration when using the council's digital channels.

Practical engagement tips

Ingredients for success

By engaging with such varied communities, grantees also developed a series of practical learnings for how to deliver projects as inclusively and meaningfully as possible. For many, this grant funding created opportunities to test out ideas for the first time and in doing so develop new understandings about what works best in the context of this grant funding.

Take the opportunity to trial new venues and spaces: Often budget restrictions mean councils use traditional council buildings to host events with communities and bring people together for specific projects. Using the budget from this grant funding to try hosting events in new spaces within the community is an effective way to generate a buzz, get community buy in and let people feel like they are part of something different. In the case of one project, a grantee was able to host an event with young people in one of the most iconic venues in the borough which added to their excitement and sense of accomplishment.

"People didn't want the venue we used and they wanted a more conservative setting but this was a cool collaborative setting that was also a youth charity so we could invest into a community organisation by renting it. I think having it in that kind of environment changes how people contribute. And designing it as a launch and a celebration, so it is a positive thing, rather than just a 'co design' session in a town hall helped with the appeal even though t was co-design." (Grantee)

Practical engagement tips

Ingredients for success

Use clear and digestible materials with communities wherever possible: Conducting participatory research and engagement with communities can unsettle traditional methodologies and approaches. This can be a challenging adjustment from a council perspective. However, it is crucial that clarity and simplicity are prioritised (instead of e.g. methodological rigour). When engaging with communities make sure (and take the time to check) that the language you are using is landing with your audience.

"A learning is that we gave a very thorough researcher pack to residents but we know that people have understandably not read that so it needs to be less long" (Grantee)

Create multiple options for engagement and feedback for communities: A multi-pronged approach to engagement increases the reach of inclusion of projects. For example, gather feedback from residents using digital engagement (e.g. QR code survey form), physical forms and also in person verbal feedback.

During events or engagements always make to time to introduce and explain: Whether online or offline, residents always value councils taking the time to introduce everyone in the room and explain why they're there. Many residents engaged during these projects were less familiar with their council and its processes, so introducing any new faces will help them to feel comfortable and willing to participate.

Maximising impact of internal and external partners

Ingredients for success

Council community engagement is most effective when it runs through the organisation and involves different services. However, not all grantees experienced this organisational culture. This section highlights the tips and tricks learnt by grantees to help navigate wider council mechanisms and bureaucracy to deliver their project.

Recruiting external partners can help drive impact: Working in partnership with community organisations and/or academic and research partners was a cited factor in the success of grantee projects. They provide an alternative perspective on approach and methodology but also, more importantly, are able to build trusting relationships with residents where councils may struggle.

"It's worth having the independence of a research partner as there's cohorts who have a lack of trust with the council. Would a council officer ever get to the real truth?"(Grantee)

Work across silos in council to ensure you build on existing work: Linking to the challenge of navigating council mechanisms, it is clear that community engagement risks taking place in a silo separate to other interrelated and useful work taking place across the council. Building connections with colleagues, exploring the council server, and finding out about existing research/engagement can ensure that new projects have maximum impact and target new areas.

"There is so much duplication across the council and lots of good work sitting in a room collecting dust. We're all time poor and have loads to do and when you're giving a task you look outwards rather than inwards and we've learnt to do this even more. We should have had an honest conversation with ourselves and looked within at the relevant work going on. If there's a learning that my team will take away, it's that."(Grantee)

Thank you

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