



# Connected Communities

Supporting Inclusive  
Recovery in London

## **LONDON MET CARES**

Centre for Applied Research in Empowering Society

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## LONDON MET CARES

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#### Executive Summary

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Secondly, we would like to thank our partners and research participants from 3 London municipal organisations for their openness, eagerness to engage with our team and co-design this research. We found working with all participants, from operational staff to service leads and senior management, extremely rewarding. In each research site, our work panned out slightly differently in terms of duration, method and type and depth of collaboration, hence, in many senses this project consists of three different studies linked by our common interest and focus on the relationship between municipal state actors and the local communities and residents they serve in the context of post Covid recovery.

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Finally, we are grateful to the London Metropolitan University for funding this research through the Transformation Funding grants between 2021 and 2023, and to the London Met Lab, for fostering connections and later supporting the set-up of the Centre for Applied Research in Empowering Society (CARES).

# 01 Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the Connected Communities project (2021-2023), which investigated how participatory aspirations enshrined in the [2020 London Recovery Programme](#) (by London Councils and the Mayor of London), particularly the commitment to community engagement, have been interpreted and implemented in three municipal contexts. The report positions the strategic commitments made by the three municipal actors to their residents along the spectrum of public participation, and outlines how place, and the institutional actors' interpretations and views shape municipal organisations' approach to community engagement in urban regeneration. *This work is a snapshot into the organisations we worked with. Strategic thinking and operationalisation of community engagement in all organisations has evolved since 2021/22, yet the unique insights presented here will remain relevant both for the organisations themselves and for others (from various sectors) who are grappling with the issue of embedding participatory approaches in their decision-making processes.*

## Context of Research

The context of this research is marked by the recovery efforts post COVID-19 in London, where strategic actors such as the Mayor of London and London Councils sought to tackle the severe social and economic impacts of the pandemic that disproportionately affected under-represented communities. The [2020 London Recovery Programme](#) adopted a mission based approach with the view to restore confidence in the city, minimise the impact on communities and build back better the city's economy and society. Central to the programme was pursuing key outcomes across all 9 missions, using cross-cutting principles and centring the recovery efforts on engagement.

## Project Aims and Objectives

Against the above-mentioned background, this project aimed to investigate how municipal actors in London (2 local authorities, and 1 regeneration site) interpret and act upon the participatory goals of the London Recovery Programme. Our objectives were to 1) understand how these actors strategise and operationalise community engagement in the context of regeneration policy and practice and 2)

understand the barriers and enablers to embedding meaningful community engagement within the organisational practices. This juxtaposition between the strategic corporate level and the individual and collective understanding and positioning of actors in relation to community engagement will help us understand practical, institutional, cultural and epistemic barriers to implementing engagement.

## Research Methods and Participants

The project used a multi-method and multi-case study approach that consisted in documentary analysis (of strategic and operational documents), semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and collaborative workshops with municipal actors at all levels of management (service directors, leads and operational staff). In each organisation we co-designed the focus of the study (within the parameters set above) aiming that the research findings, as well as the participation of the organisation in the research bring mutual benefits.

## Key Findings

We organised the main findings of this research along three dimensions: Policy, Place, and People. At the level of **Policy**, we found that the strategic aspirations (as set out by a range active strategies) in relation to community engagement are predominantly positioned at the *Inform*, *Consult*, and *Involve* levels of the [Public Participation Spectrum](#), with limited moves towards more empowering forms of governance. The type of participation municipal actors pursue depends on the strategic buy-in from political and administrative leaders, whose leadership is vital in the process of establishing organisational coherence and in embedding engagement principles across different services.

At the level of **Place**, we found that physical, social, and psychological infrastructures significantly shape municipal actors' approaches and their ability to engage residents and community organisations in the process of urban regeneration. The built environment (transport, industrial and commercial infrastructure) can act both as barrier but also as a facilitator to both social integration but also to pursuing more participatory forms of governance. At the same time, urban regeneration has negative impacts on social connectivity, eroding social infrastructure and community spaces along the way. This erosion, the mistrust and resentment it creates amongst communities, who feel that regeneration has

been done to them rather with them (historically), alongside with lack or a loss of a sense of belonging to a place, create psychological infrastructures that can hinder efforts to connect with residents.

At the level of **People**, we found that individuals actors within organisations may share quite different views and beliefs in relation to what meaningful engagement is, what purpose it serves, what forms it should take and what the value of it is. Some of the divergent narratives on the meaning and purpose of engagement reveal inherent tensions between participatory governance and the institutions of representative democracy. Alongside often conflicting and unclear steering from political actors, this shapes the context that public administrators need to navigate when designing and implementing community engagement initiatives. Whilst there is agreement on the need for trust-building through involving local communities in the process of regeneration, conflicting beliefs as to extent of and the form of community empowerment further complicate developing coherent engagement strategies.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

For meaningful community engagement to be successfully embedded, public sector organisations must align their strategic aspirations, with their internal organisational capabilities (including ensuring there is a shared understanding of the meaning, purpose and value of engagement), and with public expectations as well. We recommend that municipal actors co-produce engagement principles with resident and community groups so that expectations are clear. We also recommend that engagement principles and toolkits for engagement are embedded across services, ensuring coherence. However, this should not undermine the flexibility to adapt and learn along the way, nor should it stifle innovation when it comes to engaging with residents. Engagement should be supported organisationally by adequate resources, training and learning through communities of practice.

# 02 Background and Context

## 2.1. Background

This research and knowledge exchange project was conducted by a team of researchers from London Metropolitan University, led by Professor Diana Stirbu between 2021 and 2023. The project received funding from the London Metropolitan University Transformation Fund and was developed as a follow up of the [Social Integration and Regeneration Learning Network](#) knowledge exchange programme (2020-21), commissioned by the Greater London Authority. The primary focus of the Learning Network was on providing space, time and skilled facilitation to municipal actors regeneration teams to come together and learn from one another, and to build participants' confidence and capacity in embedding social integration principles (equality, participation, relationships) into their work. One of the key results of that initiative was identifying research questions pertaining to how municipal actors (local authorities, development agencies, etc) in London understand and embed the goals of community engagement in urban regeneration practice after the Covid-19 pandemic.

This research was co-designed with our partners, a major regeneration site in London and two local authorities, who all showed interest in further pursuing some of the key issues raised through the learning network. With each research site we held informal conversations and preliminary workshops shaping the area of interest they wished to explore with our research team during the project.

## 2.2. Context of the research

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, London faced an extremely challenging period, as the economic, social and health impact of the pandemic had disproportionate effects on different communities and further exacerbated deeply rooted inequalities ([Nazroo et al, 2020](#)). Local economies, high streets, and the services that London Boroughs and the Greater London Authority delivered had been severely affected.

The urgency of restoring confidence in the city, minimising the impact on London's most vulnerable communities and rebuilding the city's economy and society, were reflected in the mission-based London Recovery Programme ([GLA, 2020](#)). The programme aimed at providing the strategic framework to address social, economic and health inequalities, deliver a cleaner, greener London (amongst others). ***Key to that was collaborating with and involving London's diverse communities through ongoing meaningful and authentic engagement to enable a strong civil society that supports an inclusive recovery process in London.***

Despite the challenging post-pandemic context, the Recovery Programme ([GLA, 2020](#)) set the agenda to reimagining the city and fostering a culture change so that shared goals can be met by pooling together the expertise, resources and efforts across multiple organisations and sectors, and across local communities.

The Programme sought to build on the work between City Hall, London boroughs and London's community groups, voluntary organisations and businesses that had come to the fore in responding to the pandemic. It sought to harness the opportunities of new partnerships that have been forged in the process.

Whilst the relation between local communities and London's municipalities witnessed a transformation during the pandemic, the aspirations set by the London Recovery Programme ([GLA, 2020](#)) were quite ambitious in terms of embedding participatory approaches in all aspects of the recovery work at local level. Our own programme on social integration in regeneration revealed the need for local authorities officers to better understand 1) the dynamic between social integration principles (equality, participation and relationships) ([GLA, 2018](#)) and their everyday practice, particularly around what makes for effective and meaningful community engagement, 2) how participatory approaches can be embedded in the practice and policy ([SIRLN, 2021](#)), and 3) what levers they have in the restoring and maintaining trust of local communities in the context of regeneration, an area often equated with gentrification and negative social impacts.

## 03 Project Aims and Objectives

This project is primarily interested in the question of what ongoing meaningful and authentic engagement with London's heterogenous and diverse communities entails in the context of the challenges and opportunities presented by the recovery process as laid out in the London Recovery Programme ([GLA, 2020](#)).

Together with our partners we aimed at:

- *Understanding how the aspirations of the London recovery programme around embedding community engagement in the process of recovery were interpreted, understood and implemented in local contexts in London;*
- *Understanding the specific approaches, challenges and opportunities that London's local authorities grapple with or capitalise on under two of the London Recovery Programme missions (Highstreets for All and Building Stronger Communities).*

The two missions targeted set out the following targets:

- *Highstreets for all* - Deliver enhanced public spaces and exciting new uses for underused high street buildings in every Borough by 2025, working with London's diverse communities.
- *Building Strong Communities* - By 2025, all Londoners will have access to a community hub ensuring they can volunteer, get support and build strong community networks. ([GLA, 2020](#)).

The project did not aim at evaluating whether these targets were reached but helped us locate our engagement focus within the broader strategic context. We sought to gain an understanding of how the challenges and opportunities can be harnessed to strengthen, cultivate and enhance citizen participation and community engagement in urban regeneration. Our work supported efforts to shape and put in practice transformative visions aimed at municipal regeneration focused on keeping wealth in the local economy (community wealth building), thus counteracting economic insecurity and inequality, which were so exacerbated by the pandemic. In doing so, we aimed to help enhance the collaboration between local authorities and their communities to enable a stronger civil society.



# 04 Research Methods and Participants

Our methodological design involved a multi-method approach that included in-depth engagement and co-design our partner organisations to firm up the focus of the research in each research site, followed by semi-structured interviews, focus groups and collaborative workshops with institutional actors and external stakeholders. In total we interviewed 21 strategic actors at director or service lead level in all three organisations, held two small focus groups (at service team level), and conducted two collaborative workshops in one of the sites (see Table 1).

Additionally, we accessed a wide range of active strategic and operational documents (communication, community, place, inclusive economy, cultural activation, housing, regeneration and economic development strategies) in each organisation.

Research setting	Interview and Workshop participants characteristics
Site 1	4 one-to-one interviews (Directors) 1 focus group (1 Director, 1 Service lead, 1 operational staff)
Site 2	7 one-to-one interviews – 6 Directors of Services and 1 Service lead Workshop 1 – 9 participants (6 Directors of Services and 3 Service leads) Workshop 2 – 9 Participants (1 Services lead and 8 operational staff)
Site 3	5 one-to-one interviews (2 Directors and 3 Service leads) 1 group interview (2 Directors)
<b>Total</b>	<b>Interviews – 21 (15 Directors, 5 Service leads and 1 operational staff)</b> <b>Workshops – 18 participants (6 Directors, 4 Service leads and 8 operational staff)</b>

*Table 1 – Research Participants*

The research received ethical approval from London Metropolitan University’s Research Ethics Committee. Access was negotiated through an initial co-design process where we firmed up a focus for each organisation. Whilst we had a framework structure that was guided by our research questions, we tried to make the research and the engagement with the three partners relevant and useful for them too. Once access was granted, each participant (in interviews, focus groups and workshops) received a consent form and a detailed project description providing information about the study, and about how the data collected will be used.

### **Co-designing the research focus**

The co-design process aimed at 1) securing access, 2) understanding organisational priorities in terms of community engagement, and 3) shaping the focus of the research so that it benefits our partners and informs their internal processes (i.e., launching and /or developing a community engagement strategy, embedding engagement within all services areas, etc). We held at least two meetings with key stakeholders in each organisation until we finalised the focus and agreed on the level of access granted to operation and strategic documentation.

### **Documentary research and strategic analysis**

In each organisation, we located active strategies (on communication, community, place, inclusive economy, cultural activation, housing, regeneration and economic development) and operational documents that were relevant to the key lines of inquiry underpinning our research (citizen and community engagement; place transformation and regeneration; post-covid recovery; and building stronger and resilient communities). Within each of the documents analysed, we identified strategic commitments in relation to citizen participation and community engagement. We also accessed publicly available archives of previous consultation exercises held by municipal actors that had an urban regeneration focus.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

The interviews focused on how institutional actors understand the meaning, purpose and value of community engagement in the context of local strategies for recovery. We also explored what existing engagement practices were developed and used across the organisation, and what individual actors perceived as the barriers and enablers to successful implementation of participatory forms of governance. The interviews were conducted on-line, recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed and validated by our team.

### **Focus groups and collaborative workshops**

In workshops, we explored practice and implementation. We conducted two such collaborative workshops with one of the partners. The first was with senior management and we invited them to reflect upon the initial findings of our research in their organisation. The second one was conducted with operational staff at the frontline of turning the organisation's participatory vision into practice. All

workshops and focus groups were conducted on-line, recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed and validated by our team.

### **Anonymity and confidentiality**

To preserve the anonymity of the individuals involved and considering that the teams we worked with were quite small (hence easily identifiable in the context of specific organisations), we made the decision to anonymise the organisations as well. This report will refer to these individual organisations as ‘municipal actors’ or ‘Site 1’, ‘Site 2’, ‘Site 3’, when referencing interview and focus group data. This will, of course, affect the level of granular information and specificity in the report (i.e., strategic documents will be used generically, rather than specifically to a particular organisational strategy).

Nonetheless, we believe it was important to ensure confidentiality. The high level anonymisation of the organisations (Site 1,2,3) allowed us to illustrate this report with a series of powerful direct (anonymised) quotes from our participants without risking exposing them.

### **A note on the snapshot nature of this research**

*This work is a snapshot into the organisations we worked with. Strategic thinking and operationalisation of community engagement in all organisations has evolved since 2021/22, yet the unique insights presented here will remain relevant both for the organisations themselves and for others (from various sectors) who are grappling with the issue of embedding participatory approaches in their decision-making processes.*

## 05 Key Findings

Our guiding research questions were the following:

- *How are the aspirations of the London recovery plan around embedding community engagement in the process of recovery interpreted, understood and implemented in local contexts in London?*
- *What were the specific approaches, challenges and opportunities that London's local authorities grapple with or capitalise on under two of the London Recovery Plan Missions (Highstreet for All and Building Stronger Communities).*

We organised the key findings from this research along three dimensions: Policy, Place, People. First, we identify and locate participatory commitments within the official **Policy** narratives of each organisation (strategy documents) and map them across two dimensions: one given by the Spectrum of Public Participation ([IAPP2, 2018](#)) and one along the main stages in the policy cycle (agenda setting, formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation). This will provide us with an understanding of the strategic context in which community engagement is operationalised.

The second dimension – **Place** – refers to characteristics of the locality and the built environment of the area where our participant organisations operate. The themes identified and explored here pertain to specific broader contextual factors that may hinder or enable meaningful engagement between municipal actors and local communities.

The third dimension – **People** - is concerned with individual narratives: we were interested in understanding their positioning in relation to what meaningful and effective community engagement is, what it is for, what forms it takes, and what they perceive as hindering or enabling organisational efforts to embed meaningful and inclusive forms of engagement in urban regeneration.

## 5.1. Policy

### 5.1.1. The importance of the strategic context: favourable but limited

In our documentary analysis we looked for key terms pertaining to engagement and participation: “engagement”, “community engagement”, “partnership”, “participation”, “involve”, “collaborate”, “co-production”, “working with”, “empower” and “co-design” and identified several dimensions of commitments and promises that these strategic documents contain. We then mapped these commitments against the dimensions of Public Participation Spectrum: Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate and Empower ([IAPP2, 2018](#)).

### IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation



IAP2’s Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public’s role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

		INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL		To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC		We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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Figure 1- Spectrum of Public Participation ([IAPP2, 2018](#)).

We found that all three organisations frame their strategic commitments and aspirations in relation to community and resident engagement slightly differently and position themselves against the Spectrum of Public Participation differently (see Table 2).

The IAPP2 Public participation spectrum frames the **Inform** dimension as a promise to provide the public with balanced and objective information that will enhance understanding of local problems, alternatives, opportunities and solutions proposed ([IAPP2, 2018](#)). It is essentially a promise to a one-directional, yet timely and relevant communication with residents. Our analysis reveals that there is a slightly different emphasis on this type of engagement, with a stronger focus on public information in Site 1, and a significantly weaker focus in Site 3.

*We aim to provide comprehensive updates on the progress of urban redevelopment plans, ensuring all residents are aware.” (Strategic Document, Site 1)*

The **Consult** dimension is framed as a commitment to obtain feedback on analysis, alternatives and decisions made by municipal actors. This is, essentially, a promise to a two-way communication with residents, involving provision of information, listening and actively acknowledging citizens’ concerns and needs ([IAPP2, 2018](#)). Strategic documents from all three research sites make strong commitments to consultation. Consultation is one of the most institutionalised forms of public engagement, with some areas of policy making statutory requirements on public bodies to consult with citizens (i.e., planning).

*“We are committed to listening to our residents’ concerns and aspirations on issues like housing and local amenities.” (Strategic Document, Site 2)*

*“We welcome resident feedback on our new housing initiatives, allowing community concerns to be heard.” (Strategic Document, Site 1)*

The **Involve** dimension frames engagement as “working directly with the public”, ensuring that their needs and aspirations are properly understood and considered by policy makers. This is, essentially, a promise to allow access to the decision-making process, thus enhancing the potential of influencing decisions ([IAPP2, 2018](#)). Our analysis suggests that Sites 1 and 2 are most committed at strategic level to involving residents and local communities, especially in economic development and regeneration.

*“Residents are encouraged to participate in our urban regeneration forums to provide insights into their priorities for the community.” (Strategic Document, Site 3)*

*“...working with residents to gather input on community-focused projects to help shape local improvements.” (Strategic Document, Site 2)*

The **Collaborate** dimension frames engagement as a partnership between decision makers and the public in all stages of the process (identifying problems, alternatives, developing solutions etc) ([IAPP2, 2018](#)). This dimension overlaps to an extent with concepts such as co-production, co-design and co-creation, although this specific use of language in the strategic documents we analysed does not always match with the normative ideals found in the theoretical literature. Our analysis suggests that Sites 3 and 2 are most committed at strategic level to collaboration and partnership work.

*“Through collaborative work with community anchors and local businesses, we aim to build an inclusive economy that benefits all residents.” (Strategic Document, Site 3)*

*“Partnering with local businesses and community organizations, we aim to co-create affordable workspaces that foster inclusive growth.” (Strategic Document, Site 1)*

The **Empower** dimension refers to placing final decision-making power into the hands of citizens, essentially encapsulating a promise from decision makers to implement decisions taken by the public ([IAPP2, 2018](#)). This is the least developed dimension in the strategic documents analysed.

Overall, whilst the strategic context is favourable, at least at discourse level, approaches to participation in all three sites have a common emphasis on the informing, consulting and involving levels, often illustrated by language like “working with,” “listening to,” and “keeping informed.” There is some usage of language pertaining to collaboration, mainly in economic development and community wealth building initiatives, but there is very little evidence to suggest municipal actors are committed towards *empowering* residents and local communities (see Table 2). This means that the aspirations of municipal actors (as framed by their strategies) falls short of more empowering models of participatory democracy and governance.

Mapped against the policy cycle stages, most participatory commitments sit predominantly in the formulation and implementation stages, with some commitments pertaining to agenda setting, but no real consideration of embedding engagement at the evaluation stage. What this means is that all three actors are focused on the “working together” aspect of participatory governance, whilst the opportunities they create for residents and communities to input into strategic priorities (the ‘what on’ aspect) are limited, and the opportunities to lend themselves to public scrutiny are even less so (the ‘to what effect’ aspect). ***This suggests that the engagement and participatory loop is not fully closed***, which can have potentially, negative consequences on sustaining a level of high quality and meaningful engagement with residents in the long term.

<b>Public Participation Spectrum Level</b>	<b>Site 1 (I)</b>	<b>Site 2 (H)</b>	<b>Site 3 (RD)</b>
<b>Inform</b>	X X  Frequent use of language pertaining to informing residents, communicating to residents etc.	X X X  Significant presence of language focused on updating residents about ongoing projects, policies, and services.	X  Emphasis on transparency in policy updates.
<b>Consult</b>	X X  Frequent use of language pertaining to soliciting community feedback for housing, social policies and eliciting resident views in planning.	X X X  Strong use of language focused on feedback being gathered	X X  Common use of language pertaining to gathering insights from residents.
<b>Involve</b>	X X X  Prominent use of language suggesting community needs (ought to) shape development.	X X  Certain initiatives involving residents in feedback loops, particularly in community projects and localized economy plans.	X  Language used focuses on residents being involved in community wealth-building and regeneration projects.
<b>Collaborate</b>	X  Commitments to 'working with' or 'in partnership with' community organisations and anchors are evident in economic regeneration and affordable workspace initiatives.	X X  Collaboration commitments present in specific projects but not widespread across strategic policies.	X X X  Notable presence of language suggesting collaboration with local organisations especially in community wealth building and economic inclusion projects.
<b>Empower</b>	X  Limited use of the empowerment rhetoric, and lacking substantial decision-making transfer to residents, despite some work around community power.	X  Very limited use of language committing to allow for resident-led decision-making or full empowerment in governance.	X X  Some use of aspirational policy language around community empowerment, building capacity and social capital.

*Table 2 – Mapping strategic aspirations against the Spectrum of Public Participation*



### 5.1.2. The importance of strategic buy-in

In all organisations the importance of strategic buy-in has been emphasised in the interviews. Both political and administrative leadership are critical for the way in which municipal actors operationalise the aspirations of community engagement. Similarly, our interviewees mentioned the buy-in of communities themselves (in the context of large-scale area transformations) and the buy-in of external partners, such as developers. Relevant to community engagement, the shifts in leadership (through elections, or through new senior management executive appointments) can bring along a recognition of the need to change the relationship with the community, and act as a catalyst and an enabling factor.

Political leadership is key to driving community engagement. The interviews reveal that the lived experience of communities needs to be seen as an asset and capability, which leads to a deeper and richer understanding of the context of social problems.

***As such, political leadership as well as senior leadership need to promote a feasible and consistent community-based approach across all services and departments.***

*“I look for that direction from the top because I might say I want power sharing, you know, but it's way beyond my pay packet, whether you believe it or not that's what they want to happen. So, I need that direction from the top because we are, whether you believe it or not, quite hierarchical organisations. [...] So, I think that layer of the executive and the immediate layer of management is critical the same way as the mayor and his cabinet.”*  
(Interview, Site 2)

Summing up, political and senior leadership is a crucial enabler for public administrators to develop deeper, and more meaningful citizen and community engagement practice across different policy areas. All three sites benefit from a favourable strategic context generally, yet public participation approaches are primarily oriented towards the **Inform**, **Consult** and **Involve** levels, with less emphasis on **Collaborate** and minimal support for more **Empowering** models of participatory governance.

## 5.2. Place

In urban regeneration, 'place' is as significant as it gets – it is the canvas that both developers and municipal actors must work with in their efforts to improve and revitalise neighbourhoods and communities. This revitalisation of public spaces (high-streets, community centres, public libraries etc) is essential for social integration and for encouraging residents to participate more actively in local activities. For instance, one interviewee emphasises the role of public libraries:

*"The libraries are quite important places in the borough, and politically, and I suppose, yes, for the well-being for residents as well... there's a project to increase footfall and make the [local] library a place where people actively seek to go." (Interview, Site 1)*

Similarly, another interviewee notes that post-Covid recovery efforts have focused on the public realm:

*"A lot of the thinking around recovery and place-based regeneration has been about what happens to high streets, where people socialize, and how we make them spaces that are inviting and safe, especially post-COVID." (Interview, Site 2)*

But whilst the post recovery focus on place is important, features of local areas can shape the way in which municipal actors involve communities in the process of regeneration. The physical / built environment can hinder or enable better and meaningful engagement between state actors (i.e., local authorities) and residents, as well as social integration (see the [Social Integration Design Lab 2028/19 GLA](#)). Similarly, the social and cultural infrastructure of a place can dictate the type, breadth and depth of engagement initiatives, depending on the cultural and ethnic diversity, and the existing levels of social action and connectivity. Lastly, psychological infrastructures (or the psyche of a place) can also influence community engagement as the residents' trust or mistrust in the local decision makers, social cohesion, local histories, community resilience can play a significant motivator role in engagement.

The three areas managed by our three participating organisations vary considerably along the above dimensions. There are some notable similarities in terms of ethnic diversity, all three areas being amongst the most diverse areas in the Greater London and nationally in terms of percentage of residents born abroad and of BAME groups residing in the area. There are, however, significant differences in terms of job density, household medium income, and social action (measured as percentage of adults who are involved in volunteering).

### 5.2.1. The role of the built environment

The built environment poses challenges for social integration and public participation. The prevalence of mainly large-scale industrial infrastructure designed mostly for commercial use not for the community itself poses significant challenges in one of the areas. One of our interviewees notes that:

*“There's a historical legacy physically of that being an issue in (Site 3) I mean, the [transport infrastructure], for example, [...], it doesn't open on to community, it only opens to the [Major Commercial Site]. So, you could live within 100 yards of it and have to walk half a mile that way and come back again to actually get into it. And that's and that's because the area was designed to serve [the Major Commercial Site]. It wasn't designed to create a neighbourhood in the community.” (Interview, Site 3)*

This poses challenges for mobility, accessibility, social cohesion etc. Similarly, we heard from our interviews in Site 1 how the built infrastructure in one of the local areas (big public transport hub) also poses challenges to accessibility and ensuring community safety.

Other elements of the physical infrastructure such as industrial space/land that is underdeveloped, or water features may present some real opportunities for development, but ensuring the social and economic benefits stay in the area and cascade through all residents is difficult to achieve.

### 5.2.3. The social connective infrastructure being depleted by regeneration

Social and cultural connective infrastructure is extremely important to community health and wealth, as well as to social integration ([Mayor of London, 2020](#)). The working definition of social connective infrastructure, adopted by the Greater London Authority suggests that:

*“Social infrastructure covers a range of services and facilities that meet local and strategic needs and contribute towards a good quality of life, facilitating new and supporting existing relationships, encouraging participation and civic action, overcoming barriers and mitigating inequalities, and together contributing to resilient communities. Alongside more formal provision of services, there are informal networks and community support that play an important role in the lives of Londoners.” ([Mayor of London, 2020, page 14](#))*

However, significant interventions in the built environment and local economies can lead to the social connective infrastructure being somewhat depleted. This fits the narrative of regeneration and development being *done to communities* rather than *with communities*. One of our interviewees noted why it was so important to have big scale area-based conversations in Site 2:

*“But there was an appetite because it is a community that has been done to historically, with what happened in [Neighbourhood], with the way [regeneration of local street] was approached, knocking down of heritage, buildings and so on. You know, you might be able to justify and explain all that, but I'm just describing the way the community have seen it; erosion of black spaces, Caribbean spaces... (Interview, Site 2)*

Similarly, another interviewee suggests that the mass migration in the 80s (from Site 3) had devastating effects on the cultural and social infrastructure in the area:

*“when the [industrial infrastructure] were decommissioned in the 1980s, almost massive mass migration out of the area and the closure of almost all of the organically developed cultural and social infrastructure.” (Interview, Site 3)*

Whilst this is not a case of regeneration and development being at the core of the social infrastructure closing (on the contrary, it was a case of under-development), this creates significant challenges now for the re-development of the Site 3 area, where both historical and new communities share a newly emerging space, but in the context of a distinct lack of social connective infrastructure.

#### **5.2.4. The psychological infrastructure of places in urban regeneration**

The psychological infrastructure, or the psyche of a place, is understood here as a less tangible form of infrastructure concerning the emotional, and cultural heritage shaping how residents and communities make sense and interact with and in their local area. Thus, psychological infrastructure refers to the sense of belonging individuals feel for their local areas, the resilience of their communities, and their trust in their community and local authority. **Trust** is an important psychological factor shaping the relationship between municipal actors and residents.

*“I think one of the things that comes out of that is that lack of trust with institutions, particularly for immigrant communities or community, who were historically immigrants. And so, no matter how much we say that we're not the DWP [Department for Work and*

*Pensions], they don't trust us, and then we aren't communicating with them". (Interview, Site 1)*

In the context of regeneration, community trust is particularly significant, yet elusive to municipal actors. Long histories of *development being done to people and areas* (akin to trauma) create a context of mistrust and resentment. One interviewee noted how stories of erosion and loss of traditional community infrastructure are carried through the years:

*"People have long histories and memories; young people from the black community have grown up, who weren't born when I was working in the 90s and tell me that history, because it's so powerful the sense of erosion and loss. And so, their sense of an area changing is still dramatic, even though they're younger and the area hasn't changed as much in recent years. (Interview, Site 2)*

A **lack of sense of belonging** to the area can be a real barrier to social integration and to achieving community cohesion, especially in the context of significant transformations to the built environment and the scale of influx migration in an area, which is bound to reshape the socio-economic and cultural fabric of an area. When residents do not feel a sense of belonging in their area, this can impact the degree to which municipal actors can engage and galvanise support for regeneration initiatives. As one of our interviewees notes below, breaking down psychological barriers to community involvement can be a very difficult task:

*"But then I think the third thing which is slightly more difficult is about, you know, even if you take, if you have a wall and you take it down, but everyone on either side of that wall has been living their whole life, never going the other side, and then they're not immediately going to start going over there. [...] but then whenever we've done engagement stuff, they often say we don't come that side because it's not theirs; they don't have this kind of ownership and stuff. So really, there's a kind of thing about the more events we put on for the local people, the more that we promote directly to them what's going on that will break down those of them that so you can remove the physical barrier, but then you've got this almost like psychological barrier?" (Interview, Site 3)*

To sum up, in urban regeneration, the concept of **Place** serves as a significant element, shaping both the physical and the connective social fabric of society. The built environment prevalent historically in industrial areas often creates barriers to social integration, with infrastructure oriented more toward commercial interests than community needs.

Additionally, economic and urban regeneration without considerations for community wealth building and community wealth keeping, often erodes well established social connective infrastructures, which are so critical to community resilience, to a sense of belonging to an area, etc, and can leave residents feeling that regeneration and/or economic development is done to them. This, in turn, can amplify feelings of mistrust and a lack of community ownership, adding further barriers for municipal actors in their efforts to foster an inclusive regeneration policy and practice.

***Therefore, not only do municipal actors need to have in-depth and granular knowledge of their communities, but they also need to understand how the physical environment and the transformation to it impact on communities on a deeper level.***

### **5.3. People**

This section presents insights into how institutional actors position themselves epistemically along the spectrum of public participation, how they define and understand concepts such as meaningful engagement, how they interpret existing strategic commitments and, how they experience and make sense of their own practice of community engagement, both in term of barriers and enablers.

#### **5.3.1. Epistemic positioning of public administrators matters**

At an epistemic level, the divergence of views on the meaning, purpose, and value (outcomes) of engagement can potentially affect the success of participatory initiatives and the development of a collaborative and co-production focused culture within the organisation. Our interviews reveal that despite consensus on the value of engaging with communities ((re)building trust, building capacity and legacy in the community, and having a positive relationship with residents), there are rather different interpretations and positionings with regards to concepts such as enabling, or power sharing, and about the use of participatory instruments. This divergence may affect the level of (political and senior management) sponsorship and buy-in of engagement initiatives, as well as the extent to which engagement principles are applied and disseminated across the organisation:

*"the mindset of leaders at my level and the next tier up, some of whom will understand enabling, some of whom will think enabling is pushing out to the to the communities, which it isn't, you know, and that sort of big society idea of enabling, which is rubbish" (Interview, Site 2)*

The spectrum of *meaning of engagement* is quite broad. Community engagement is mainly defined as a direct, and at times hyper-local involvement and trust-building exercise within communities, alongside the desire to create a meaningful and sustainable relationship between municipal actors and residents. Engagement is understood as going beyond simple consultation; it is about inclusive processes, paying attention to cultural considerations, and identifying means through which residents can influence decision-making. Some of our interviewees define engagement as an informal relationship with the 'place' and residents, whilst others emphasise the aspect of listening to community and individual concerns (uni-directional) or holding big conversations (bi-directional) with residents. One account defines engagement as a *solid and high maintenance relationship in which one needs to invest in*, (Interview, Site 2) whilst others focus on the mediated relationship with communities or groups.

Whilst the above are some examples of individual perspectives, we did notice some variations when we tried to aggregate these meaning and get a sense of collective understanding of engagement. For instance, in Site 1, interviewees equate community engagement with efforts to bring diverse residents together and to gather feedback on service improvements. Participants often used language including 'safe spaces', 'co-located services' and referred to the big participatory exercise that was taking place in the borough at the time of the research. Therefore, community engagement was perceived as an ongoing process to build trust and connection with residents.

In Site 2, some interviewees focused specifically on the relational and culturally specific nature of engagement. One interviewee noted the shift during COVID-19 toward "*working more relationally with individuals and with communities rather than technocrats or bureaucrats and transactional work*" (Interview, Site 2), demonstrating a focus on deeply understanding community histories and needs. Interviewees use terms such as "relational" and "trust-based" engagement, "trauma-informed practice", highlighting meaningful rather than tokenistic input. One interviewee also notes the lessons learnt during the pandemic, when "*trying to work with some centralised volunteer scheme... really didn't work... because you need to work with grassroots groups*" (Interview, Site 2).

In Site 3, the interviewees reveal more of a focus on operationalising community participation, especially around economic and cultural activation.

*"We have mechanisms to involve local communities... through [Initiative that brings together citizens in a panel that makes decisions about cultural planning in the area], which allows them to input directly into the program" (Interview, Site 3).*

Whilst this definitional diversity is to be expected, variations in interpreting the ***purpose of community engagement*** (why we do it) can potentially have negative consequences. Some of the narratives encountered pertain to the notion of *political accountability* (we have to do it because it is a statutory requirement, or because there is a strategic commitment to it). Other interpretations suggest some inherent tensions in regeneration policy between *balancing strategic policy goals* (urban development, economic revitalisation of areas, addressing housing needs) *with community needs*. One such tension occurs in large-scale urban development projects, where municipal actors and developers need to consider ways in which the benefits of these developments are kept within the local community. One interviewee uses the terms *local* and *global* community to convey the benefits of regeneration as community wealth building and commercial attractiveness.

*"We've got aspirations around local and global community wealth building and commercial attractiveness... Our aspiration is all around making sure that it benefits the local community, providing a programme that is relevant and interesting." (Interview, Site 3)*

Community engagement therefore is a means to navigating and addressing such tensions, a way of legitimising processes of regeneration.

However, our interviews also reveal ***competing narratives in relation to broader tensions between participatory and representative democracy***. These epistemic divergencies can be rather tricky to resolve in organisational context. While the normative ideals of participatory democracy and governance promote a continuous, and inclusive dialogue between the public and the institutions of power, they come at clash with more traditional representative democracy power structures, where elected officials assume full accountability, where the most significant public input happens at every election. In one of the sites, these concerns over the legitimacy of more enabling forms of participatory governance were expressed by some participants:

*"You have people who are embedded within communities with a lot of unelected power... and representative democracy, though flawed, is meant to keep councils accountable and inclusive" (Workshop, Site 2).*

***Resolving these tensions internally and reaching a shared understanding of the meaning and purpose and depth of community engagement (and power) is quite important in ensuring coherence of approaches to engaging residents. Therefore, participatory efforts should be seen as complementing rather than competing with representative democracy.***



We conclude that the meaning and purpose of community engagement vary across the three sites, but there is generally agreement with regards to the importance of community engagement for building trust, capacity, and long-term relationships. Whilst divergent views on power-sharing and enabling forms of engagement bring to light the tensions between representative and participatory forms of democracy and governance, negotiating these tensions is difficult in the context of the existing structures of governance and accountability, yet paramount for insuring coherence of purpose.

### 5.3.2. Barriers to meaningful engagement

The interviews and collaborative workshops with participants allowed us to identify a wide range of factors hindering the efforts of municipal actors to engage meaningfully with their communities. One of the challenges faced is **striking the right balance between breadth and depth of engagement considered**. A more targeted, user centred approach was seen as effective in gaining policy insights for the purpose of service improvement. The big (area-based) conversation model has been mentioned as a way of understanding local issues at scale, facilitating visible conversations with residents, and gaining insights into policy preferences as well as needs of local communities. The more collaborative, co-design and power-sharing models were mentioned in the context of shifting the dial in terms of re-building trust, and significantly reshaping the relationship between the municipal actors, residents and local communities.

However, the nature of community engagement in urban regeneration presents intrinsic challenges, especially when it comes to **translating the high-level aspirations from community engagement into detail**. Municipal actors need to balance between service delivery, cost-effectiveness, achieving efficiencies, as well as managing conflicting aspirations and visions in the community etc. One participant noted that:

*“the purpose of the [participatory][planning] panel is really to co-design, to shape, to inform and to advise the council and for us to really take into account what they're seeing and what they want to see in the area. I think the difficulty often comes with translating those kinds of high-level aspirations from the community and to then the detail”* (Interview, Site 2)

Issues such as **time constraints, cost of engagement and managing expectations** are significant barriers to pursuing any form of engagement by municipal actors. One participant noted that even when engagement was prioritized, budget constraints led to compromises, especially for sustaining long-term

partnerships and engagement: *“When those funds go away, we’ve spent money and achieved nothing sustainable in the long term” (Interview, Site 2)*. The idea of sustainability (in this context a lasting improvement in the relationship between the Council and residents) is also brought to light by participants talking about the importance of managing expectations and the challenge of that: *“Managing what people expect vs. what can be realistically done is important” (Interview, Site 1)*. This re-enforces the point about the clarity of purpose (why do we engage) around community engagement, but also about the importance of having a standardised approach to defining and communicating this purpose to the public.

Another barrier to effective and meaningful engagement is the **lack of expertise and skills within the municipality**.

*“Despite being a 30-person team...our team is constantly stretched...there’s still quite a low awareness...about how you need to completely change your resourcing and timelines to do long-term effective community participation. (Interview, Site 3)*

This leads to questions about both the design and the delivery of engagement processes and there is a recognition amongst participants that badly designed engagement can be as detrimental as a lack of engagement. Community engagement has often been described as **transactional** and **extractive**, which lacks the sustained dialogue needed for meaningful community impact. This can lead to loss of trust in the long term, and to consultation fatigue. One participant noted that:

*“at the end of the day, most of the engagement exercises conducted by local authorities tend to be extractive, time-bound where people are called in from time to time (Interview, Site 2).*

Organisational **resistance** towards embedding participatory forms of governance can also act as a barrier to meaningful community engagement.

*“we have parts of the organization where we meet no resistance, in fact, the opposite of resistance, we meet huge enthusiasm for this kind of ways of working and for doing meaningful engagement. And there are other parts of the organization that are very much locked into the kind of statutory consultation, ‘we do because we have to’ kind of model. And there’s a million miles between those different positions and they exist and all the bits in between across the organization” (Workshop, Site 2)*

Additionally, in Site 1 for instance, one participant acknowledged there were **uneven practices** within the organisation, where some staff pursue meaningful engagement while others “*just tick the box*”. This reflects broader structural challenges:

*“It’s a governance issue...effective community engagement should be more executive-level,” suggesting that without executive-level buy-in, engagement practices remain inconsistent. (Interview, Site 1)*

Organisational resistance, uneven practices, as well as badly designed engagement (transactional, extractive) are symptomatic of a lack of internal coherence within the organisation with regards to the meaning and purpose of engagement, leading back to the epistemic positioning of individual and collective actors, and to the strategic context and the buy-in of leadership actors.

Participants also mentioned a range of external barriers to engagement, one of the most prominent being the **willingness** and **capacity** of residents to engage:

*“not all residents want to be involved in co-production. And actually, when you start to talk to residents, they want to hold the council to account for anything that’s going on when you have that point to contact” (Workshop, Site 2)*

Public administrators question whether residents have the time and capacity to deal with the complex issues addressed by the engagement processes. **Levels of public understanding of how government works** may affect engagement initiatives and well as the broader relationship between residents and the council:

*“One of the issues is that the language and processes in local government are not always accessible...the community doesn’t always know how things fit together or how decisions are made, which affects engagement because people are left out or misunderstand the purpose” (Interview, Site 1)*

Issues such as **digital literacy**, **English language literacy**, **level of confidence to engage and awareness of engagement opportunities** are also mentioned as important obstacles to meaningful community engagement.

To sum up, this section outlined both internal and external barriers to meaningful community engagement as perceived and understood by the individual actors in the partner organisations. These

barriers highlight the complexity of translating participatory aspirations into practical, sustainable and meaningful processes, and the challenge of designing fit for purpose engagement initiatives. Municipal actors face numerous challenges in balancing economic and social drivers in urban regeneration, and in managing the public's expectations whilst facilitating meaningful forms of engagement that go beyond transactional and extractive models. Furthermore, these barriers are exacerbated by organizational resistance and limited capacity and expertise available. Low public understanding of government processes, as well the reluctance, inability, or lack of time from residents to engage are also important barriers to meaningful engagement.

### 5.3.3. Enablers

Meaningful community engagement supports a qualitative redefinition of the relationship between local communities and municipal actors. This can be enabled by several factors, such as: political leadership and strategic buy-in (discussed earlier in this chapter), principle-based design of engagement activities, level of integration of engagement across services, organisational capabilities, as well as characteristics of the local community and area.

We have already mentioned earlier that badly designed community engagement can be more detrimental to trust and participation than no engagement at all. Good community engagement design includes establishing clear and coherent engagement principles and communicating them across the organisation and the community, using a wide range of engagement channels, using pre-engagement activities, and closing the feedback loops.

**Clear principles** provide a structured approach, ensuring that engagement across various services remain consistent. They also help differentiate between consultation, involvement, co-design, and empowerment, thus offering clarity to residents as well. One participant noted that

*"It's essential to have a framework. It grounds our approach across different services, so everyone's working with the same understanding of engagement". (Workshop, Site 2).*

However, whilst engagement principles offer guidance, and structure, there is a need for flexibility to address unique community needs and conflicts. One official observed that:

*"The principles give us a foundation, but every community and project is different; we have to adapt our methods while staying true to our core values". (Workshop, Site 2)*

Using **diversified communication channels**, including outreach through community organisations, digital and non-digital forms, helps engage groups that are routinely under-represented, making engagement more inclusive. Similarly, participants suggest that **closing the feedback loops** effectively creates a sense of continuous involvement and accountability and enhances trust.

*"Closing the loop... that 'we said, you said, we did' kind of thing... it's important for communities to see that what they contributed is acknowledged". (Interview, Site 3).*

Within the regeneration policy, **pre-engagement activities** to get residents' feedback before a trial or consultation significantly shifts the dial in terms of the type of relationship municipal actors have with residents. This is valid both for municipal actors but also for developers. But this requires a culture shift internally (for municipal actors), challenging default positions and in-built processes.

*"early community engagement and bringing the community with you as a proposal evolves will mean that you will save, financially save a huge amount of money [...]. The ideal is that you have support from the community, you don't have objections, you don't have a bumpy ride through planning committees. [...] And I think most developers do get that" (Interview, Site 2)*

**Organisational capabilities** are also seen as an enabling factor, as well as building a team that is knowledgeable and that reflects the diversity in the community. Skills development cannot be only done at leadership level, but also at frontline: anti-racism, poverty and trauma-informed approaches, being inclusive and compassionate. These just a few of the skills mentioned by some of our interviewees.

A deep understanding of local communities is also an important enabling factor, from ensuring inclusivity, diversity and accessibility to really **tailoring both the external communications as well as engagement practices for different audiences**. For instance, creating programmes that capture the voices of the people, or ensuring bottom-up approaches are genuine and do not embed council jargon (i.e., policy documents that accessible and understandable to lay people), or mixing methodologies to enhance outreach and using multi-channel engagement and communication were mentioned as enablers.

*"There are still a lot of local authorities that would say 'we'd rather hold a public meeting on Thursday at 7:30 and if you want, come along, and if not, don't come along'. So, we've really made an effort to go out into communities and just be there*

*and have that visible presence and allow people to come to us. You want to talk to people about libraries, don't go to the library, go to the park where they all are, and get them to come talk to you about libraries" (Interview, Site 2)*

**Ownership** in the relationship with residents and not outsourcing engagement to either the voluntary sector or to external consultants can improve the confidence of municipal actors. Whilst the voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) are acknowledged to be important partners, some participants do highlight the delicate balance that needs to be struck in terms of community engagement. Whilst some view that VCOs may act as community gate keepers, outsourcing engagement to VCOs can potentially lead to municipal actors losing the confidence to speak to residents directly.

*"And councils, I think sometimes they're in danger of losing the confidence to talk to their residents directly. If they always need an intermediary in order to be able to talk." (Interview, Site 2)*

These enablers highlight how structured support, inclusive approaches, continuous communication, and community focused design facilitate more meaningful engagement across these organisations.

#### **5.3.4. Demonstrating the value of community engagement**

One of the recurring narratives during the interviews but also during the workshops was around demonstrating the value of engagement. In site 2, participants in the research alluded to the fact that the new leadership wanted to ensure that the organisation can demonstrate the value created by engaging with communities and residents.

Overall, the narratives on value differentiate between value for the municipal actors, value for citizens, value for developers and more broadly for the society. The value of community engagement for the municipal actors is framed around legitimisation, trust building and gaining valuable insights for the purpose of policy development.

*"Community engagement ensures the council's actions are directly informed by local needs, which builds trust and facilitates decision-making" (Interview, Site 2).*

For citizens, the value of community engagement is understood as a mode of empowerment, ownership and direct influence into policy design and delivery. In site 3, the therapeutic value for engagement is also mentioned:

*“... does the partner, or the community feel that they're being listened to, do they feel it's working for them? The value must come from the fact that we are speaking to people who will be here and will continue to experience what we've put in place and the kind of role we have there, as everyone who might be involved in this type of work. So I think that's the value and this kind of really broad sense of it.” (Interview, Site 3)*

For developers, participants suggest there is a financial and reputational value in engaging meaningfully with the communities. The financial value is linked with easing the bureaucratic costs of not having the community on board during the planning process.

More broadly, community engagement is seen as supporting tackling broader societal issues, such as structural inequalities. Engagement can foster participation and a sense of social cohesion and integration. In Site 2 and 3, this is also linked with addressing endemic mistrust and the negative legacy of community trauma that was inflicted by big regeneration projects or by de-industrialisation.

For more information and analysis of the value of community engagement, please see how [Dudau, Stirbu, Petrescu and Bocioaga \(2023\)](#) synthesize the value created by engagement in a multi-study that included Site 2.

# 06 Conclusions & Recommendations

This project explored questions around what ongoing meaningful and authentic engagement with London's heterogenous and diverse communities entails in the context of urban regeneration post pandemic. Together with our partners we sought to:

- *understand how the participatory aspirations of the London recovery programme were interpreted, understood and implemented in local contexts in London, and*
- *understand the specific approaches, challenges and opportunities that London's local authorities grapple with or capitalise on under two of the London Recovery Programme Missions (Highstreets for All and Building Stronger Communities).*

We worked with three municipal actors in London (two local authorities and one major regeneration site). In all three, we found a favourable strategic context to develop and embed meaningful community engagement in the process of urban regeneration, yet this context was limited to the less enabling and empowering forms of participation, sitting somewhere between the Inform, Consult, Involve levels of the Public Participation Spectrum, with a different focus on all three. We also found that successfully embedding community engagement in all three organisations we worked with was dependent on factors related to Place, Policy and People (here understanding as individual actors and their interpretations of what community engagement is).

The built environment (industrial spaces, water, transport infrastructures), the social connective infrastructure (community assets and relationships) as well as the psyche and psychological infrastructure of places (levels of trust, resilience, sense of belonging) can either hinder or enable municipal actors' efforts to engage with their communities. At policy level, the level of political and administrative leadership buy-in is crucial for developing a shared sense of purpose of community engagement. Public administrators at the front-line of engaging with residents need clear direction and guidelines for engagement.

More importantly, we found a lot of consensus in what regards what the barriers and enablers of meaningful community engagement are for all three sites of research. We analysed individual actors' own epistemic positions in relation to the meaning, purpose and value of community engagement. And whilst some divergence exists within the organisations in terms of meaning and purpose (which



highlights some inherent tension between representative and participatory democracy), there multifaceted value of engagement is something that participants in all three sites agree upon.

Some of the barriers we identified refer to internal organisational capabilities, strategic embedding of engagement principles, strategic buy-in, and availability of expertise, time and resources to support community engagement. Other refer to external barriers that have to do with the communities’ own capability and motivation to take part in engagement exercises. Other barriers are broader and more specific to urban regeneration, where there are inherent difficulties in managing community expectation and balancing economic and market pressures with community aspirations.

The most significant enablers for embedding meaningful community engagement in the regeneration work of municipal actors pertain to the extent to which at institutional level there is a shared vision about what engagement is for, how it should be done in different context and for different purposes, and what the measures of success. Additionally, skills development, expertise and ownership and confidence and having conversations with residents are also seen as enablers.

In the light of our analysis, we recommend that municipal actors (local and regional):

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Co-produce engagement principles with the communities they serve</li> <li>2. Embed engagement principles within their organisational strategy and across all services – Engaging with communities is everyone’s duty within the organisation.</li> </ol>	<p>At the level of Strategy</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Create opportunities for staff to share best practice across service areas</li> <li>4. Elicit feedback on the quality of engagement from local communities and residents</li> </ol>	<p>At the level of Operations</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Ringfence and prioritise engagement budgets</li> <li>6. Invest in training and skill development for operational and executive staff</li> </ol>	<p>At the level of Resources</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Communicate the purpose of engagement clearly and the promise made to the public for each engagement exercise</li> </ol>	<p>At the level of Communication</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Avoid using participatory buzz-words (especially politicians) that do not match the reality of what decision makers are prepared to do (for instance, wrapping everything in co-production language, when what the organisations actually does is a more traditional form of consultation)</li> </ol>	<p>At the level of Rhetoric</p>

*Table 3 – Recommendations*

**1. Co-producing engagement principles with residents** can contribute significantly to the success of participatory initiatives. First, the co-production process itself may help municipal actors understand in great depth the extent to which residents and local community groups are motivated and have the adequate capabilities and opportunities to engage. Grounding the co-production process in analytical models that help understand individual and collective behaviour (such as the COM-B Model)<sup>1</sup> can lead to co-designing interventions (i.e., engagement principle, participatory interventions, skills and capacity building) that support better and more meaningful engagement between municipal actors and residents. Additionally, engagement principles co-produced with residents can enhance the legitimacy of participatory initiatives internally within the municipal organisations, thus contributing to breaking some internal barriers to embedding engagement within practice and policy.

**2. Embedding engagement principles within organisational strategy and across all services** ensures overall coherence. Internally, municipal actors need a clear Theory of Change around community engagement, with clarity about the desired outcomes and impact they seek from engaging residents and communities, with clarity about how these impacts and outcomes will be measured and with clarity about the type of engagement mechanisms used and what promises they make to the public. Embedding engagement principles within the organisational practice and strategy reinforces the message that engaging with communities is everyone's duty within the organisation.

**3. Creating opportunities for staff to share best practice across service areas** contributes to 1) ensuring that engagement principles (and toolkits) are disseminated and adopted across services, whilst 2) ensuring that learning, innovation, and improvement keeps the principled approach relevant and fit for purpose. Participation in internal and external communities of practice around the role of participatory instruments in strengthening local representative democracy supports these goals too.

**4. Eliciting feedback on the quality of engagement from residents** can support organisational learning. Co-producing principles and toolkits for engaging with communities is not a one-off event, but the start of establishing a continuous dialogue with residents. Feedback, especially from under-represented and under-served groups is particularly important.

**5. Ringfencing and prioritising community engagement budgets** provides a foundational element for a continuous dialogue between municipal actors and residents and supports learning and innovation as well as breaking some of the internal barriers to engagement identified (i.e., cost).

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<sup>1</sup> The COM-B model frames individual behaviour as resulting from the interaction between one's capability, the opportunity, and motivation to carry out that behaviour (Michie, van Stralen, & West, 2011).

**6. Investing in training and skill development for operational and executive staff** supports capacity building internally and thus breaking some of the internal barriers to engagement (i.e., lack of internal capabilities).

**7. Communicating the purpose of engagement clearly and the promise made to the public with each engagement exercise** is critical to maintaining and building trust. Clear communication can also support wider public education (i.e., what the internal decision-making processes are, what role and powers municipal actors have in shaping regeneration policy and practice, how the views of citizens will be used etc).

**8. At discourse level, avoiding participatory buzzwords that do not match the reality** of what decision makers are prepared to do (for instance, wrapping everything in co-production language, when what the organisation does is a more traditional form of consultation) is critical to maintain trust and building good faith in the participatory processes.

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