

FABIAN POLICY REPORT

UK:  
100

GROUNDWORK  
CHANGING PLACES  
CHANGING LIVES

WOODLAND  
TRUST

# POWERFUL PEOPLE, POWERFUL PLACES

*Mobilising the yet to be mobilised*

*By Tara Paterson with a foreword by  
Nick Forbes and Judith Blake*

---

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank our funding partners UK100, Purpose, Groundwork and the Woodland Trust for their generous support of this project.

Special thanks to Polly Billington for her valuable insights and expertise which she helpfully shared throughout the process, and to Graham Duxbury who provided useful feedback and advice in the early stages.

Thanks also to Ed Wallis who initiated the project and shaped the early research and whose previous Fabian Society contributions greatly influenced this work.

The research in this report would not have been possible without the support of Megan Bentall and Charlotte Woodworth at 38 Degrees, who kindly distributed our survey through 38 Degrees campaign lists and provided the resulting data.

The author would also like to thank the councillors and campaigners who took the time to share their views on environmental engagement in interviews and through our call for evidence.

At the Fabian Society, special thanks goes to Olivia Bailey for her considerable help and guidance throughout the project, and to Tobias Phibbs for his help facilitating and arranging focus groups and Andrew Harrop for useful comments on early drafts.



**FABIAN SOCIETY**  
61 Petty France  
London SW1H 9EU  
020 7227 4900 (main)  
020 7976 7153 (fax)

**Report Author**, Tara Paterson

**General Secretary**,  
Andrew Harrop  
**Research Director**, Olivia Bailey  
**Editorial Director**, Kate Murray  
**Media and Communications  
Manager**, Claire Sewell

**Printed by** DG3,  
London E14 9TE

**Designed by** Georgie Lowry,  
[www.gslowrydesign.co.uk](http://www.gslowrydesign.co.uk)

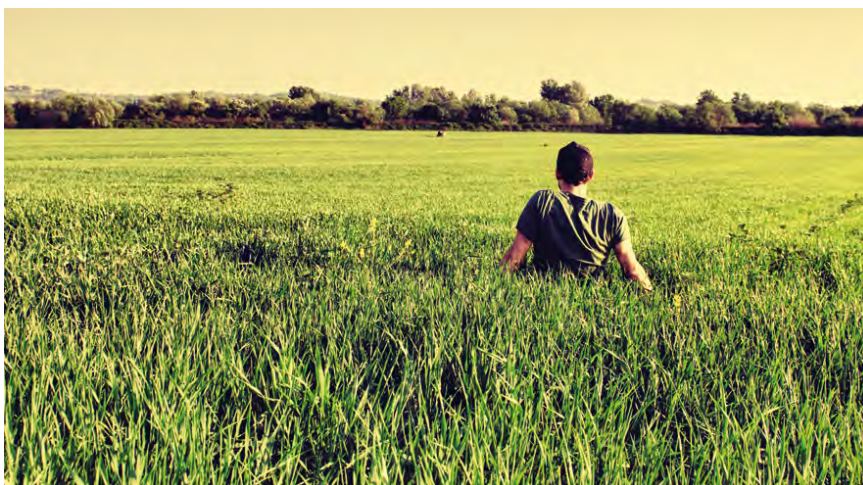
Like all publications of the Fabian Society, this report represents not the collective views of the society, but only the views of the individual writers. The responsibility of the society is limited to approving its publications as worthy of consideration within the Labour movement.

First published in July 2017.

[info@fabian-society.org.uk](mailto:info@fabian-society.org.uk)  
[www.fabians.org.uk](http://www.fabians.org.uk)

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The aim of this project was to explore the practical ways that people's attachments to their own local areas can be galvanised to create a meaningful community-led environmentalism. To do this, we held deliberative focus groups in three communities: Milton Keynes, Liverpool and Truro. The focus group locations were selected to reflect regional, political and geographical diversity. Both Cornwall and Liverpool signed devolution agreements in 2015 and gained additional powers last year. Milton Keynes is not currently part of a devolution deal though they have joined England's Economic Heartland, a voluntary partnership of councils and local enterprise partnerships in the southeast connecting Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire. Participants came from social grades B, C1, C2 and D. They were selected because they demonstrated behaviours that positively correlated with environmental action (voting and separating recycling and/or food waste at home) but were not currently engaged in environmental work or working in local government. The first half of the focus groups consisted of a series of discussion topics about environmental issues, and council and community engagement. In the second half participants were asked to design their own environmental project or campaign as a group. To gain the perspective of established activists, we also distributed a survey through the online campaigning organisation 38 Degrees. The survey went out through campaign emails associated with the environment over a period of nine days. 7,410 people responded and were screened for their participation in an environmental campaign or volunteer initiative. To identify case studies and establish best practice we also distributed a call for evidence to environmental organisations and councillors and received thirteen replies. Finally, we interviewed 12 councillors across England to understand what has been effective in their communities and gain insight into devolution deals.



## CONTENTS

Foreword	4
Executive summary	5
1. Unlocking the environmental potential in our communities	8
2. Understanding the mobilised and yet to be mobilised	10
3. Mobilising the yet to be mobilised	16
<i>Insight 1:</i> Devolution needs to include local people	16
<i>Insight 2:</i> Residents want to see local benefit	19
<i>Insight 3:</i> People need permission to act	22
<i>Insight 4:</i> Participation needs to fit with their everyday lives	26
<i>Insight 5:</i> People need to know their participation makes a difference	30
Endnotes	34



---

# Foreword



*Nick Forbes and Judith Blake are the leaders of Newcastle City Council and Leeds City Council.*

**N**ow more than ever, politics is local. The importance of people having control over their own lives has rarely been as salient as now.

The opportunities for local leaders to meet this need should be grasped by all of us with a commitment to improving the lives of the people we serve.

This research reminds us of the importance of place on our sense of wellbeing. It also indicates that elected politicians and activists underestimate the potential enthusiasm there is in our communities to be part of change and to improve and protect our environment.

It confirms our experience as city leaders: that decisions made involving the community are better decisions. That reliance on the “usual suspects” to confer the appearance of engagement isn’t enough. And that poor consultation undermines trust and can be as bad - or worse - than no consultation at all.

There is a timely reflection on the impact so far of devolution on people’s sense of local control. Enthusiasts for more decisions to be made locally should acknowledge that structures on their own are not enough. This is a process and a mindset to enable and empower communities, and where leaders have adopted that approach there is much to learn. None of us should be complacent once devolution deals have been secured: that is only the start. And the potential for shaping the environment is more important than ever.

The focus on the environment reminds us that the full flourishing of our communities relies on responsible management of the resources we have. And that it benefits all of us: people value their surroundings, including public space, clean air, wildlife and greenery, not only because they feel a responsibility for it but because they know it gives back, in better health and wellbeing for them and their family.

**People value their surroundings, including public space, clean air, wildlife and greenery, not only because they feel a responsibility for it but because they know it gives back, in better health and wellbeing for them and their family**

In a time of limited financial resources local leaders should note the advice of this report: that there is untapped resource in your community to help you make better decisions. The yet to be mobilised are a potent force for good, and harnessing their love of the place where they live could enable city leaders to make some of the big shifts on environmental actions that are needed but often dismissed as too difficult.

The approaches are important too: focusing on local benefit, fitting decision-making into people’s lives, giving people permission to act and making it clear that their participation will make a difference.

Both of us lead cities where environmental issues can often end up being the preserve of the few: we believe this research gives us and many others the insights to ensure that decisions on issues from tackling fly-tipping to generating clean energy, can be shaped by the many.

Our cities are among 70 local authorities across the UK that have committed to shifting to 100 per cent clean energy by 2050, not only because it is good for the planet but also because it is good for the people we serve. It gives us a competitive edge globally if we adopt new technologies sooner, jettisoning reliance on dirty and old-fashioned fossil fuels. It creates economic growth and helps to reduce energy costs for consumers and business. It also will make a material improvement to our surroundings, as we clean up our air.

Ensuring we can deliver on that vision will need all the insights of research like this, because a transformation of our economy on this scale will need public consent and support. The best way to build that consent and support is unlocking the enthusiasm of the yet to be mobilised to shape their surroundings. Without them, leaders are missing a trick.

---

# Executive summary

Our local environment is the foundation on which community life is built. Parks provide space for local people to come together and meet their neighbours, and clean streets embed a pride in one's place. Community energy projects imbue neighbourhoods with a sense of self-sufficiency and economic resilience while allowing residents to take charge and work together.

As we saw in this year's local and general elections, environmental issues like energy and air quality are finally becoming campaign priorities. People in British cities are angry about pollution. Many lament the decaying state of our parks. And many more believe that community ties are loosening. The need to ensure that local people have the power to improve their environments and reinvigorate their communities is perhaps therefore more urgent than ever.

To do this councils and community organisations need to reach out. In the past many took steps to answer the demands of Tony Blair's New Localism agenda and David Cameron's Big Society for more 'community empowerment' and 'citizen engagement.' Too often, however, the environmental participation opportunities that councils have adopted are still only taken up by the 'usual suspects'—groups of socially active, time-rich individuals well-versed in the language and practice of environmental politics.

Rather than leaving participation solely to them, councils and community groups should make a concerted effort to engage what this report calls the 'yet to be mobilised.' These are residents who are environmentally aware but not environmentally active. By and large, they are interested in doing more to improve the environment, if they're asked, but they lack the support and resources to get active.

Fabian Society polling indicates that the yet to be mobilised may make up nearly a third of the population<sup>1</sup> – far more than the portion currently engaged in environmental action. Crucially, they are the gateway to widespread participation. Securing the involvement of the yet to be mobilised is the first step to building a participatory culture where neighbourhood engagement is commonplace amongst many community members, including eventually those who are disconnected and hard to reach.

To understand how to open this gateway, we held three deliberative focus groups in Truro, Milton Keynes and Liverpool with participants who represented the yet to be mobilised.

We also conducted a survey with environmental activists through the online campaigning organisation 38 Degrees, which received 7,410 responses. To identify case studies and establish best practice we distributed a call for evidence to environmental organisations and councillors and interviewed councillors across England to understand what has been effective in their communities for engaging new people. The research revealed five key insights that will assist councils and activists as they seek to mobilise residents. These are:



## 1. Devolution needs to include local people

---

At the core of the devolution agenda is a promise to localise decision making and empower local communities. Our research found that so far at least, city and county devolution is not delivering on this promise. We found that:

- Few participants had heard of devolution.
- Most felt that devolution would have no impact on whether they would get involved in environmental action.
- Some were optimistic about its potential to localise decision-making. One participant in Liverpool said: *"I think we're a bit sick of decisions always being made in London when they really don't have a clue what's going on up north."*
- Others worried that it was just another way to cut funds and reduce services or that it would add bureaucracy and complexity to governance. A participant in Milton Keynes said: *"[devolution] gives that extra layer of politicians or whatever it involves in the councils, then it it's more likely to go to extra people to get rubber stamped, which just makes the whole process that bit longer and more complicated."*
- Both non-activist focus group participants and existing activists felt that the devolution process lacked transparency.

## 2. Residents want to see local benefit

---

The issues that matter most to people are those that impact them locally. Our research found:

- The yet to be mobilised are motivated by issues that affect the local community such as green spaces and clean streets. Many acknowledge the need to act on climate change but feel they can make the most impact locally.
- They want environmental projects to deliver local benefit, even those that are part of broader strategies to combat climate change such as renewable energy. A participant in Truro said: *“We’ve got these solar farms popping up all over the place, but instead of powering the local village, they’re powering the other side of the world.”*
- They are attracted to environmental initiatives that have some role for local people.

### 3. People need permission to act

For many people taking political action to improve the local environment seems foreign. They do not feel that they have ‘permission’ to act, in the way that those who are confident in their own political status do. They lack information about existing initiatives and say that they require leaders to ‘come to them’ to invite them to participate. Our research found:

- People lack the information and confidence to get started. A participant in Truro said: *“I wouldn’t know where the public outputs of information are to try and find the people... if you live in a small village and there’s an environmental issue, who, where, what, how do you start to tackle it?”*.
- Talking about environmental issues and giving people the space to plan their own participation can spark action. Several participants said that just participating in the focus group made them realise they could get involved and that they would now take steps to



**For many people taking political action to improve the local environment seems foreign. They do not feel that they have ‘permission’ to act**

contact the council or an environmental organisation.

- People believe that the onus is on community leaders to reach out. Most residents will not seek out opportunities to engage but if they ‘stumble upon’ them or are asked directly to take part then the yet to be mobilised enthusiastically get on board.

### 4. Participation needs to fit with everyday lives

Time poverty is a powerful barrier to participation but it is not insurmountable. For

our participants, finding the time to take action depended on whether the activities, venues and schedules would fit with their life circumstances. Our research found:

- Accessibility is key in determining whether someone can participate. Travel time to meetings and activities, available transport, length of commitment and physical effort required were all important factors for different people.
- For people with children, family involvement may determine their participation. A focus group participant in Milton Keynes said: *“I’ve got three young children. So, if there was something that did take some time, if we could all go and do something... then I’d obviously have a lot more time than if I had to try and find someone to have my kids”*.
- People are attracted to different levels of participation. The highest levels of participation are co-production and

## Time poverty is a powerful barrier to participation but it is not insurmountable

co-design where councils and community groups act in equal partnership with residents. The next levels are engagement and consultation. Where possible, councils and community groups should offer different ways for citizens to get involved.

- Councils should be wary of assuming that co-production and co-design always represent the gold standard of community engagement. While these approaches help to develop community leaders and should lead to improved services, they also risk handing over power to a small group of self-selecting individuals who are not accountable in the same way that elected representatives are. This does little to engage the yet to be mobilised and may actually foster a sense of exclusion.

## 5. People need to know their participation makes a difference

More than anything, people want to feel that their efforts matter. Understanding how their involvement made a difference to an issue or decision, and seeing tangible results from the work, motivates sustained participation. Our research found:

- For many participants, having a sense of ‘ownership’ over some aspect of a campaign or project makes them feel more invested in the initiative and that their role matters.
- Participating in council consultations where people are told how their input was used and what impact it had on a decision makes people want to engage further. A participant in Milton Keynes said: *“getting that feedback and knowing what was happening and being kept in the loop definitely made me think, ‘OK. Well, if something else comes along, I’m definitely going to get involved.”*
- Council procedures for incorporating feedback in consultations are frequently

not sufficiently robust. This is demoralising for residents and means that many consultation processes waste council resources.

OUR RESEARCH FOUND evidence of councils and local campaigners across the country working hard to build a participatory culture - but progress is patchy, and the need for change is growing. Our insights inform a series of practical checklists for councils and community groups looking to engage residents in their local environments. Throughout the report we suggest how councils and campaigners can do this, including:

- Remember that no consultation is better than a poorly executed consultation. Consultations that leave participants feeling like their input wasn’t accounted for, make residents less likely to participate in the future and harm trust between community members and elected representatives.
- Aim to facilitate deeper participation where residents co-produce services and projects, while ensuring that the residents involved are democratically accountable and representative.
- Invest short amounts of time in training for residents who are not engaged, which is often sufficient for inspiring further action.
- Ensure that the devolution process is transparent and meaningfully informed by local people.

Councils and local campaigners are working hard to build participatory culture – but progress is patchy, and the need for change is growing





---

# 1. Unlocking the environmental potential in our communities



There is a sense in many British communities that community life is deteriorating. Calls to take back control in last June's referendum resonated with people across the country who felt that their neighbourhoods were becoming unfamiliar and that their connection to a once familiar place had been uprooted.

While two-thirds of Britons still feel they belong to their neighbourhoods,<sup>2</sup> Fabian Society polling found in 2014 that 68 per cent of respondents believe that community spirit in Britain has declined over their lifetime. This sentiment was also reflected in our focus groups. As one participant in Truro put it:

*"Community is very dysfunctional at the moment, everyone lives in their own spaces, and there's not enough care about the community as much as they used to back in the day."*

A participant in Milton Keynes agreed:

*"If you can get people to interact with the community, then [your neighbourhood is] going to be better, because you get to know your neighbours better. It's a bit more closed off than it used to be."*

While communities feel more fragmented, so too are the local environments that hold them together. Councils all

across the country have been faced with budget cuts in recent years, compromising their ability to maintain community spaces. By the end of this year, most local authorities will have seen a 40 per cent reduction in central government funding since 2011.<sup>3</sup> Although there are signs that austerity could be loosening, government is unlikely to make restoring funding for councils to support local environmental initiatives their top priority. According to a 2015 report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), councils have made particularly deep cuts to their environment and planning functions in order to safeguard statutory services.<sup>4</sup> A Conservative party cabinet member from Peterborough City Council acknowledged the difficulty that local authorities are facing:

*"With all the will in the world to take on environmental initiatives, there's a quid pro quo and that is that our budgets have been slashed horrendously from central government and there's a play off between balancing your budget and doing what you believe and know is right for the environment and for the people of Peterborough."*

The JRF report also found that reduced budgets for park and playground maintenance mean that increased rubbish, dog

waste and overgrown grass are making some of these spaces unusable. In many areas street cleaning is becoming less frequent and recycling is becoming more difficult or expensive, which has led to an increase in litter, flytipping and vermin.<sup>5</sup>

Residents are noticing the effect of reduced budgets. In each of our focus groups council cuts and the impact on local environments were raised unprompted. As a participant from Truro noted:

*"There's a lack of bins provided, especially now through cutbacks, so a lot of [rubbish] is left on the beach or it's not recycled properly, it's not managed properly."*

And in Milton Keynes:

*"We don't get the street sweepers like we used to. We used to get the mechanical street sweepers that used to sweep the pavements as well as the road. Now, we get one huge one once a month. It goes up one side of the road and back down and then he's on the next road. So, anything that's left in-between just gets left for people to slip over."*

Participants in each group also brought up at least one park or green space in their community that was under threat.

The simultaneous decline of community life and environmental assets is no co-



---

incidence. The tight funding environment that prevents councils from investing in environmental goods also prevents them from supporting active communities and citizen power. As a councillor from Leeds pointed out:

*"We often think that volunteering and engagement are free, but they really aren't. If it's done properly and it's done well then we need to make sure that those community groups and networks are properly supported and that's really difficult when we don't have much money."*

But research suggests that investing in citizen engagement is worth it. A report from the Local Government Information Unit and Involve found that:

*"Councils who prioritise engaging citizens are likely to find that their services improve and become more efficient; with the result that voters place increasing value on their institutions, their work, their staff and elected representatives."<sup>6</sup>*

To that end, deteriorating environments and worries about community life are linked in another important way as well: they share a solution. A participatory culture, where citizen activism and influence is sustained and commonplace, can both invigorate communities and boost local environments. When residents participate in environmental initiatives, they connect with each other and their environments improve. As a man in Milton Keynes noted, the benefits might then extend outward. He said:

*"I think potentially, just by getting to know people and by [the neighbourhood] looking better, I think people would have more respect, a bit more pride in where they live and that might also improve security."*

In turn, the area's environmental capacity also improves, which may free

up council resources to invest in other neighbourhood initiatives. For example, local authorities may not need to spend as much money on community gardens if residents themselves are in charge. One councillor from Newcastle described a recycling pick-up and fence-painting scheme that has meant that:

*"The local authority has been able to withdraw from organisation of engagement activities as the capacity, experience and confidence has been built within the community and with local partners to do this and that has been particularly effective."*

### The tight funding environment that prevents councils from investing in environmental goods also prevents them from supporting active communities and citizen power

For these benefits to be realised, however, councils and community groups need to be strategic. Participation in environmental activism or council-led community initiatives still tends to be the preserve of 'the usual suspects.' Their skills and experience are valuable to any environmental project or campaign, but there will never be enough of them to build a truly participatory culture. Last year, for instance, only four per cent of people in England took part in civic participation at least once a month<sup>7</sup> and an even smaller portion are estimated to have volunteered for an environmental organisation.<sup>8</sup> One study in the London Borough of Lambeth found that a 'tipping point' is reached in communities when 10 to 15 per cent of residents are engaging regularly – more than the portion of usual suspects in most neighbourhoods. Moreover, the insular nature of many of their networks can often serve as a barrier to entry for other residents who regard them as members of elitist and perhaps self-serving cliques.<sup>9</sup>

The ultimate goal is to reach a point where the majority of the population are consistently and actively engaging in their communities. But the evidence suggests that for now most citizens do not want to take part in additional participation opportunities.<sup>10</sup> A 2014 Fabian Society poll asked: "Thinking realistically about your everyday life and how you like to spend your free time, how likely or unlikely (or neither) are you to be involved with community action to improve the environment in the place where you live?" 33 per cent said they were unlikely to be involved and 30 per cent said they were neither likely or unlikely.

On the other hand, that leaves 30 per cent who say they are likely to be involved in community environmental action – which is far more than the proportion of the population who currently take part. In a resource-limited setting, it makes sense to start by focusing on this group, who would like to engage but aren't already. This doesn't mean abandoning the goal of even broader participation. Rather, it is about being strategic and efficient in pursuing that eventual goal. The hope is that in the long-term, if this group get involved then participation could extend out further still, building civic interest amongst new and different groups of people.

We call this group of 30 per cent the yet to be mobilised, and this report is about how councils and activists can engage them. They are residents with skills, interests and enthusiasm for improving their local environments and communities but without the resources, networks or support to get involved. They might make efforts to limit their environmental harm – by recycling at home or separating out their food waste – but they aren't currently campaigning against climate change or running a Friends of the Earth group. They are a valuable wasted resource and they could be the key to unlocking a new culture of participation.

---

## 2. Understanding the mobilised and yet to be mobilised

In order to understand how to mobilise the yet to be mobilised, we began by distributing a call for evidence to environmental organisations and councillors seeking case studies and insights for effective community engagement.

We then held focus groups in different communities in England with participants who represented the yet to be mobilised. They ranged in age from 23 to 73, were from social groups B, C1, C2 and D and were an equal mix of men and women. To gain insight into the already mobilised, we also distributed a survey to environmental activists through the online campaigning organisation 38 Degrees. The survey went out through campaign emails associated with the environment over a period of nine days. 7,410 people responded and were screened for their participation in an environmental campaign or volunteer initiative. Finally, we interviewed 12 councillors across England to understand what has been effective in their communities for engaging new people. The insights gathered from this research are reflected throughout this report, and the approach we took in the focus groups and the results from the survey are described in this chapter.



### THE FOCUS GROUPS

OUR INTENTION FOR the focus groups was to understand how to best motivate the yet to be mobilised to get involved in environmental initiatives. To do this, we wanted to gain the perspectives of people of different ages and backgrounds not currently engaged in environmental action but who demonstrated behaviour indicating that they might be inclined to environmental action in the future: they voted in the most recent election and recycled and/or separated their food waste at home. The focus group locations of Milton Keynes, Liverpool and Truro were selected to reflect diversity in geography, region, council makeup and devolution status.

The first half of the focus groups consisted of a series of discussion topics designed to better understand participants' environmental priorities and motivations. Topics included local environmental issues, barriers to environmental action, contact with the council, and the devolution agenda in England. Motivations for environmental action were mostly consistent between groups but the perspectives on issue priorities and council accessibility differed between the groups. The presence or absence of local devolution proposals seemed to bear no relation to participants' sense of local attachment, their awareness of the idea of devolution, their connection with their council, or their own understanding of their ability to influence local environmental issues. In fact, participants in Milton Keynes, which is to have the fewest devolved powers, seemed most aware of council initiatives and appeared to have the most positive experiences of

participating in council activity.

In the second half of the focus groups, participants were asked to design their own environmental project or campaign as a group. They had 45 minutes to pick an issue that was important to them and identify what they hoped to achieve, how they were going to achieve this, and who they would have to convince. They then presented their projects to the rest of the group (see summaries of projects in boxes 1 to 5 on the next page).

For the most part, participants had several ideas about issues in their community they would like to address. Every group was able to come up with creative concepts in the time they had, though their projects varied in how realistic they were. Participants struggled most with the organisational and strategic aspects of their projects. When it came to campaign-focused projects targeting the council or developers, for example, participants tended to list every tactic they could think of (e.g. petitions, posters, media) rather than being selective or practical. This suggests that residents will frequently benefit from information or training on campaign practice when embarking on new activist projects. Participants' understanding of council procedures was also fairly limited, though most people seemed to know where they could access information if they needed it. It should be noted however that the yet to be mobilised in our focus groups were far from alone in struggling with local governance structures. In our call for evidence the coordinator of an environmental organisation in the east of England told us

that her organisation appointed a specific local authority liaison to keep abreast of council developments and understand processes because it was too complex for most involved.

The act of designing an environmental project was itself profoundly motivating for some participants. Afterwards, several participants said they were going to contact the council or look up an issue. A man in Liverpool closed the focus group by saying:

*"I came here open-minded, not knowing too much what we were doing and now I feel I understand more what's going on and probably it would encourage me now to have a look at this project. I know that wasn't the idea, but a bit of knowledge has made me more interested in what's going on and I probably would get more involved than if someone had asked me yesterday."*

A few even suggested that they take the projects they proposed forward. A different participant in Liverpool demonstrated particular enthusiasm, saying:

*"So, we've got tasks, we've allocated them, we've spread awareness, the local people are on board, we've got a strong community power behind us and we can push it through... Let's do this!"*

Perhaps most telling was that after the activity the vast majority said they could now see themselves participating in a similar project. Seven out of 10 participants in Liverpool, seven out of nine participants in Milton Keynes and everyone in Truro said they could see themselves participating. Although it was not our explicit intention to inspire environmental action, the impact that the focus group had suggests that bringing residents together to discuss issues and envision how they might affect them is itself a useful tool for widening engagement.

## BOX 1: THE FOCUS GROUP PROJECTS KEEP CAMPBELL PARK GREEN: AN ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT PROPOSAL

Milton Keynes

This group proposed an initiative that would offer an alternative to the development plans at a local park. Instead of the high rise blocks they said were being proposed they wanted "a recreational area for public use with amenities to complement/enhance the space, which would comprise of a play area for children, that we don't think already exists in that space, a café that doesn't exist there at the moment, a communal garden and a reduced number of dwellings to the proposed plans."

*This image is based on a drawing the focus group participants created for their project's logo*



**"We're not actually saying that we don't want the developers who are already there to stop completely. We just don't want them to do what they were intending to do"**

## BOX 2: THE FOCUS GROUP PROJECTS OUR COMMUNITY CLEAN-UP

Milton Keynes

This group wanted to organise community litter-picks with kids. They suggested reaching out to parish councillors, school groups and church groups. They wanted to approach local businesses to provide prizes so that the children who collected the most rubbish could win a prize. "So, what we want to achieve is a cleaner community around our local neighbourhood and to give the neighbourhood the resources they need to action that themselves. As part of this, as well as improving the cleanliness of the neighbourhood, we hope that it will help neighbours get to know each other. It is potentially quite an active thing to get outside and be part of that as well. Potentially reduce crime in the

neighbourhood [too]."

*"As part of this, as well as improving the cleanliness of the neighbourhood, we hope that it will help neighbours get to know each other."*





### BOX 3: THE FOCUS GROUP PROJECTS FLYSKIP

#### Truro

This group proposed a new waste collection system to reduce fly-tipping where the council would provide big skips in supermarket car parks for people to bring their rubbish and recycling. *“Then it gets picked up by the central hub and then it gets sorted, so you can put anything in it, you don’t have to sort it, you don’t have to worry about whether it’s metal or wood because it’s going to get sorted at the other end.”* Instead of fly-tipping, you fly skip.

*“We’re going to first of all prove that there is a community requirement for such a facility through social media and through a poster campaign, petitions, that kind of thing. Once we’ve proved that people would use it and that there’s a want for it, we’ve also talked about asking for people’s photographs of fly tipping. We then present that to the local councillors, we have to find them first because none of us know who they are, and potentially use the local paper to help with that as well to try and galvanise public opinion and need.”*



### BOX 4: THE FOCUS GROUP PROJECTS ALOTOFUS

#### Truro

This group proposed creating a new community hub based around an allotment. *“It’s a place that schools could use to learn about the environment, people that maybe don’t want to go out and meet people, people who are isolated in their communities can come out and work on the gardens to help people grow vegetables. The vegetables would be sold but the money also goes back into community projects. It’s a space where people can come together and learn from each other, a social*

*environment but also to empower people about the environment.”*

*“We wanted a sense of community, so helping older, younger, people with educational needs, and trying to empower them to support the environment”*



### BOX 5: THE FOCUS GROUP PROJECTS SAVE SEFTON MEADOW – KEEP SEFTON GREEN

#### Liverpool

This group proposed a campaign to stop any building on a local park, Sefton Meadow. Their goals were broad: *“We want to keep it green, we want to stop future building on the site, we want to make more use of the green space, we want to use it for leisure activities, we want to spread awareness and we want to use it for community activities.”* They proposed organising a “fun day” on the meadow to raise awareness about new development proposals and lobby the council to stop the development.



## THE SURVEY

THE SURVEY WE conducted with activists revealed important fissures and alliances between environmental campaigners and the yet to be mobilised. Of course, because of the different methods and sample sizes for the survey versus the focus groups, direct comparisons between the two are not appropriate. However the separate investigations of the groups generated important insights about how they may be similar and different.

The starkest divide between the two groups was on the question of why community members don't participate in environmental action. We asked the activists, "for those community members who do not participate in environmental initiatives, what do you believe are the main reasons they don't?" Sixty-four per cent said it was because "they believe someone else will take care of it" (see figure 1). By contrast,

when yet to be mobilised participants in our focus groups were asked why they had not taken part in environmental initiatives,

64%

*of activists said they thought that the main reason community members don't participate in environmental action is because "they believe someone else will take care of it"*

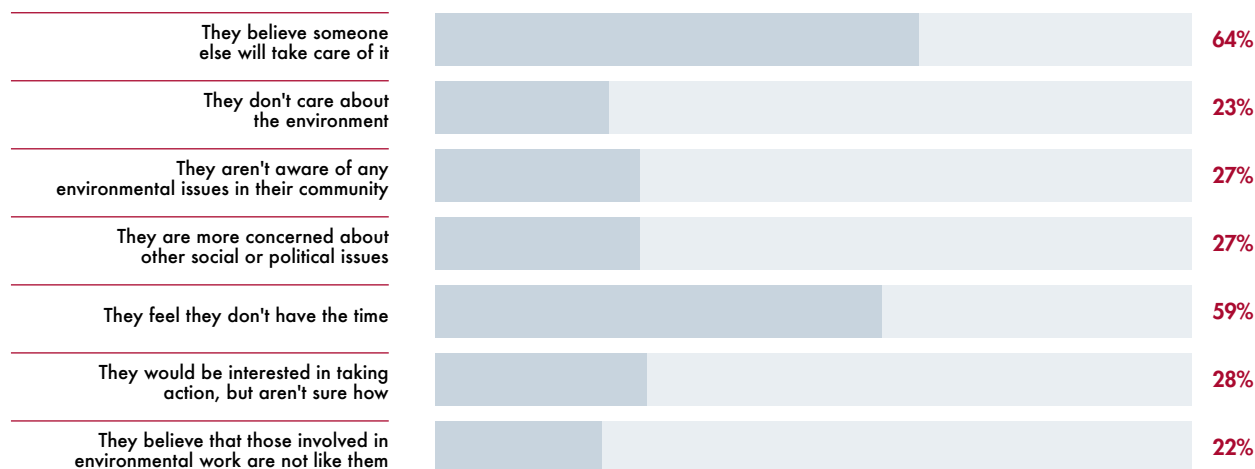
none said that it was because they thought someone else would take care of it.

Declared motivations for engaging in

environmental initiatives also differed, though slightly less dramatically. Both groups felt that wanting to improve the local environment was a key motivator for someone to get involved in an environmental initiative. In response to the question, "reflecting on your own experience, what do you believe are the key motivators for someone to get involved in an environmental initiative?", the statement "they want to improve their local environment" was the most popular answer amongst activists (51 per cent, see figure 2). However, the yet to be mobilised did not attach much importance to the second and third most popular motivating factors for activists: "feel[ing] a sense of duty to future generations" (41 per cent) and "they are concerned about climate change" (38 per cent). On the other hand, for focus group participants, wanting to engage in the community was an important motivator, but it was the least popular factor for activists (17 per cent).

FIGURE 1: Reasons activists believe community members don't participate in environmental initiatives

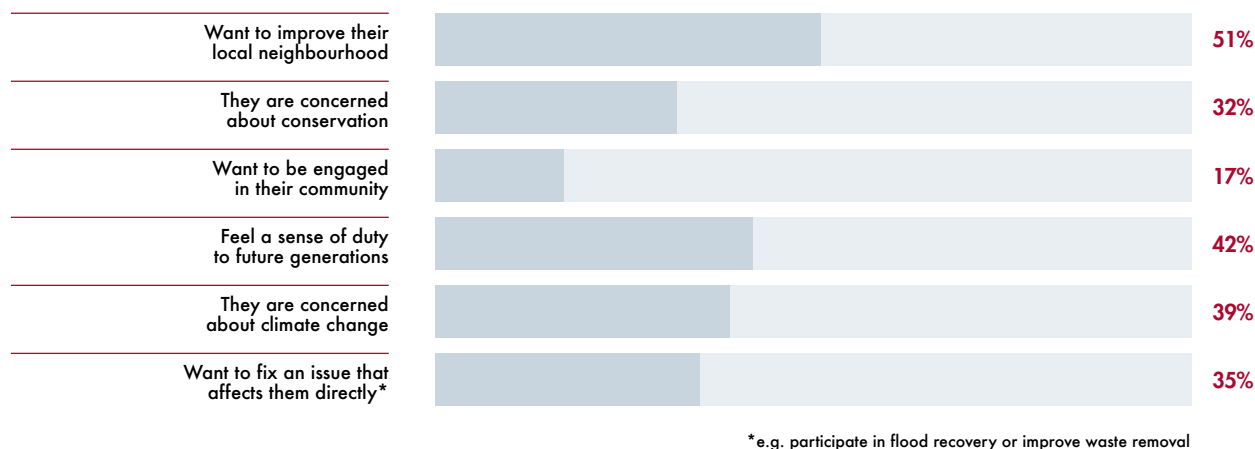
"For those community members who do not participate in environmental initiatives, what do you believe are the main reasons that they don't? (Tick up to three)"



Based on our online survey of 7,410 environmental campaigners

FIGURE 2: Motivations for participating in environmental initiatives

*“Reflecting on your own experience, what do you believe are the key motivators for someone to get involved in an environmental initiative? (Tick up to 2)”*



Based on our online survey of 7,410 environmental campaigners

FIGURE 3: Activists vs focus group participants rank issues from most important to least important

*“From your experience, which three of the following issues do you think local residents consider to be the most important?”*

Rank	Activists	Rank	Non-activist focus group participants
1	Protecting parks and green spaces in my neighbourhood	1	Making sure streets are clean with community pick-ups and reporting for fly tipping
2	Making sure streets are clean with community pick-ups and reporting for fly tipping	2	Protecting parks and green spaces in my neighbourhood
3	Encouraging dog owners to pick up dog waste and fining those who don't	3=	Ensuring recycling is easy for residents
4	Ensuring recycling is easy for residents	3=	Encouraging dog owners to pick up dog waste and fining those who don't
5	Improving air quality	5	Generating renewable energy to play our part in combatting climate change
6	Improving energy efficiency in flats and homes	6	Promoting walking, cycling and public transit instead of car driving
7	Promoting walking, cycling and public transit instead of car driving	7	Cleaning up lakes, rivers and waterways
8	Cleaning up lakes, rivers and waterways	8	Improving energy efficiency in flats and homes
9	Generating renewable energy to play our part in combatting climate change	9	Improving air quality
10	Planting trees on streets and in public places	10	Providing communal garden space to grow fruits and vegetables
11	Providing communal garden space to grow fruits and vegetables	11	Planting trees on streets and in public places



Broadly speaking, activists and focus group participants were far more aligned when it came to identifying issues that they felt were important to local residents (see figure 3). Both groups felt that ‘making sure streets are clean with community pick-ups and reporting for fly tipping’ and ‘protecting parks and green spaces in my neighbourhood’ were the most important issues and both groups felt that ‘providing

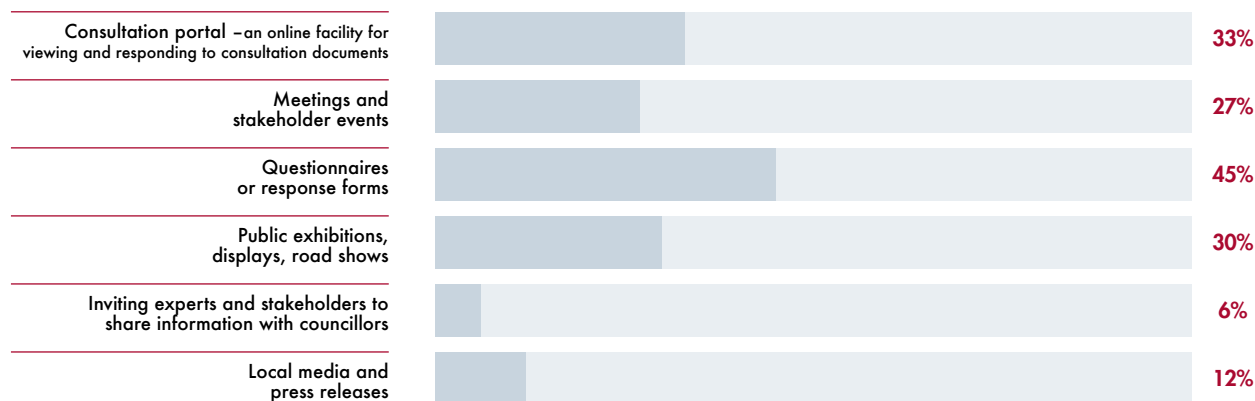
communal garden space to grow fruits and vegetables’ and ‘planting trees on streets and in public places’ were the least important issues.

Finally, though activists were slightly more familiar with council processes than focus group participants, the survey revealed that even environmental activists don’t frequently engage with the council. When asked how they had engaged with

their local council in the past, the most popular response was “questionnaires and response forms.” But fewer than half (45 per cent) of respondents had ever even taken part in these (figure 4) and only 52 per cent had ever heard of their council doing any of the consultation methods (figure 5).

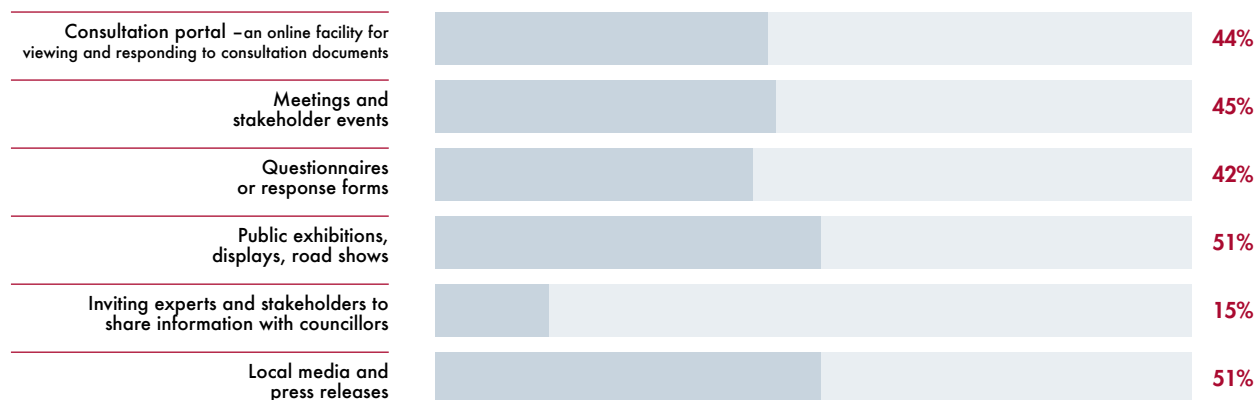
**FIGURE 4: Council initiatives that activists have participated in**

*“Which, if any, have you ever participated in with your local council?”*



**FIGURE 5: Council initiatives that activists have heard of their council doing**

*“Councils seek public participation in a variety of ways. Of the following, which, if any, have you ever been aware of your local council doing?”*



---

# 3. Mobilising the yet to be mobilised

To unlock participatory culture and allow residents to ‘take back control,’ the environmentally aware need to get active. Our research shows that this is very achievable. The yet to be mobilised have a strong desire to improve their local environments and build community spirit. But the gulf between the yet to be mobilised and the already engaged is wide.

This chapter details the five key insights our research told us about how to mobilise the yet to be mobilised, and includes checklists for councils and activists to consider in their day to day work.

---

## INSIGHT 1: DEVOLUTION NEEDS TO INCLUDE LOCAL PEOPLE

The recent Fabian publication *Green Places* made the case for an environmentally-driven, community-focused approach to devolution. It argued that environmental infrastructure was the ‘green thread’ that unified both the places and policy areas that new devolution deals brought together. The report’s authors acknowledged that some devolution deals lacked transparency or even risked taking power further away from communities by placing it in the hands of regional bureaucracies instead of local councils. But ultimately, they said, there was potential for devolution to “flow ever downwards” to communities and people themselves, reinvigorating democracy and re-engaging citizens in the process. We share the hope that devolution could put the local environment back on the agenda and help deliver a promise of community empowerment. What we found in our focus groups and interviews, however, is that so far this vision of local control and community empowerment is

yet to be fully realised.

Amongst the councillors we interviewed, the perspectives on devolution varied widely. Some felt that devolution was adding another layer of complexity to already confusing governance structures, distracting staff and councillors from “getting on with” work in the community because they were considering and negotiating deals, or placing undue burden on councils to deliver more services. Those in areas with established devolution deals, however, seemed to be more optimistic. A councillor from Oldham credited the Greater Manchester devolution agreement for a funding boost to the community energy sector, for instance.

The yet to be mobilised have a strong desire to improve their local environments and build community spirit

For the majority of people involved in environmental organisations who responded to our call for evidence, devolution seemed largely irrelevant to their work. They either weren’t sure how a devolution deal, newly established Combined Authority or Local Enterprise Partnership would affect their organisations or felt that there would be no change. As a coordinator of a voluntary group in Leicester put it:

*“The local support comes from me and my service. We all work in partnership to deliver the support to enable these independent groups to succeed... I don’t envisage any changes if power were devolved to local authorities.”*

One respondent from a national environmental organisation lamented the “shocking lack of accountability or public scrutiny” in the devolution process. He felt that civil society is struggling to keep up with the devolution agenda as it has been led by local authorities and the Treasury with little input from local people or voluntary organisations.

Amongst our focus group participants devolution was a largely unfamiliar concept. In Liverpool, which has had two high profile devolution deals and elected a city-region mayor for the first time this year, only one participant said that he had heard the term. Few in Truro had heard of devolution even though Cornwall was the first rural authority to sign a devolution deal and was granted significant new powers over health, business, energy and transport in 2015. After reading a news article about devolution in their area, participants expressed both hope and scepticism about what the implications might be for their community. Those in Truro almost unanimously worried that devolution would have a negative impact on their community. They felt that language in the BBC article we shared with them about ‘franchising’ local bus services and ‘integrating’ health and social care made it sound like services were going to get worse or privatisation would increase.<sup>11</sup> In Liverpool, however, some participants were more optimistic about localising control. One participant in Liverpool said:

*“I think we’re a bit sick of decisions always being made in London when they really don’t have a clue what’s going on up north. So, if we’ve got more control over our affairs, it’s got to be better.”*

---

But in Milton Keynes, one participant worried that transferring power from Westminster to the council raises issues of transparency and accountability. He said:

*“The other concern I have is a little bit about transparency... I just think people give less attention to the local council elections than they do when they’re voting for an MP. I just get a little bit worried about what happens in the council chamber, because it’s not covered as much as stuff that’s happening in Westminster. So, on the local news you don’t tend to get much... on decisions made by Milton Keynes Council. So, although you’re giving more powers down there, where’s the accountability that goes with it as well and the transparency of those decisions?”*

Several participants felt that devolution deals would impact local authority funding. In Liverpool, a participant was hopeful about devolution’s possible impact on the council’s fiscal position:

*“The city has evolved dramatically [since Liverpool’s devolution deal in 2015] but you can’t really figure out whether it’s because of economic growth [or devolution] but this is really important from a local economy point of view because the council is struggling with the budget and everything from the central government, because they’re constantly getting deficits. Every year they have to reach ... I don’t know how many millions of pounds they have to save in budget, so that means they have to cut all the services and stuff, but with this devolution maybe they can recoup some of the money that they need for the services that they have to provide for the local community.”*

On the other hand, there was a fear that devolution might put more pressure on the public purse. A man in the Milton Keynes focus group said:

*“Sometimes I feel that all devolution is doing*

*is introducing another layer of cost to government. So, rather than just Milton Keynes Council, you’ve then got east of England or the west of England or the Midlands group that has some cost associated with it. Then, you’ve got the Westminster Parliament as well and it’s not as if there’s less MPs when they do this.”*

When it came to how they thought devolution could affect their own participation in environmental initiatives, most participants said it would have no impact but a few felt it would make them more likely to participate. A woman in Liverpool felt that:

*“Because it’s local, it’s easier to get involved and it’s less of a big ... you know, this perception of the Big Brother sort of thing. I’m not saying it’s a good thing, but I think it’d be easier to get involved.”*

A participant in Milton Keynes agreed:

*“Because it is your area, you’re more likely to [participate] ... I guess, potentially, more people in your neighbourhood would feel the same, because it is your area, they know the problems, they know the issues that you’re looking at and if you’re only fighting for your area, rather than something in the north of England or whatever, you think, I’m not going to get involved, because that’s a national government thing and I don’t know that area, it doesn’t impact me.”*

### **Engage people in the devolution process**

The complexity of the discussion reflects the complexity of the devolution agenda as a whole. There are opportunities to harness some people’s excitement about localising decision making, but expectations must also be managed. Equally, it is crucial that residents and organisations engage and are engaged in the devolution process to mitigate transparency concerns

and increase participation. The House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee warned in February 2016 that:

*“There has been a consistent very significant lack of public consultation, engagement and communication at all stages of the deal-making process.”<sup>12</sup>*

Part of this was due to a seven week deadline that central government imposed for initial bids, which meant that many councils did not feel they had the time to do public engagement before submitting their proposals. Now, however, local authorities can and should involve the public and community organisations at all stages of the devolution process: while preparing proposals, during negotiations and after the agreement.

At the time the committee report was published, West Yorkshire was the only area that had undertaken a public consultation. Since then, however, councils in Oxfordshire, East Anglia, the Solent, Sheffield, Lincolnshire, the West of England and elsewhere have all initiated consultations on devolution. The citizens’ assemblies in Sheffield and the Solent offer a useful model for citizens to shape the devolution process in a meaningful way that goes beyond the basic consultation practice of filling in an online form or attending a public meeting (see case study 1).

Of course, in some circumstances it is entirely reasonable that details of a negotiation cannot be made public. But even in these circumstances there are still opportunities for councils to inject more openness into the process. At minimum, they should publish the criteria for assessing devolution proposals and where possible, they should publish initial proposals and government counter-offers.



## CASE STUDY 1: COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN DEVOLUTION IN PRACTICE: CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES IN SHEFFIELD AND THE SOLENT

In 2015, an alliance of researchers and civil society organisations called *Democracy Matters* organised two pilots of citizens' assemblies exploring devolution in Sheffield (Assembly North) and South Hampton (Assembly South). Citizens' assemblies are groups of randomly selected citizens that are meant to be representative of the population who come together to learn about, deliberate upon and make recommendations on a particular issue. The idea is that they provide citizens with information and expertise in order to enable them to participate directly in decision making and engage with issues in an informed

and thoughtful way.

Each assembly took evidence from those involved in city deal negotiations, local stakeholders and experts on devolution. According to the *Democracy Matters* report, "the assembly recommendations displayed a nuanced understanding of the devolution agenda. In Assembly South, participants were evenly split in their support for the current devolution proposals. They were divided on what kind of governance structure they wanted, with an elected assembly gaining the strongest support. Assembly North was more supportive of the local devolution deal. However, participants' preferred

option was a model of regional governance that embraced a larger geographical area, the creation of an elected regional assembly and more substantial powers. But overall the critical finding from both assemblies was a clear and significant appetite for far greater public involvement in the devolution deals being proposed."<sup>13</sup>

Crucially, the researchers conducting the assemblies found that those who participated went through a transformation to become more active citizens and that there was evidence of longer-term growth in political engagement following the assemblies.

## CASE STUDY 2: HARNESSING THE DEVOLUTION OPPORTUNITY IN PRACTICE: CORNWALL'S ENERGY ISLAND

The devolution deal between the Government, Cornwall Council and Cornwall and Isles of Sicily Local Enterprise Partnership came into effect in 2015, making Cornwall the first county to gain new powers. It is also one of the only devolution deals to include provisions for energy governance and environmental initiatives.

Since the deal, Cornwall has made strides towards energy independence with significant community engagement. A partnership between the Eden Project, Cornwall Council, the LEP and an engineering firm has launched 'Cornwall Energy Island.' In March 2015, they hosted a two day workshop with local people where they used 'Power Games' to challenge participants to create an energy scenario for Cornwall where energy supply and demand are balanced. They provided participants with the structure and information to

be actively engaged and test different scenarios.

The Power Games secured agreement to reduce projected energy demand in 2030 by approximately 50 per cent and to increase supply to exceed demand by 30 per cent. The hope is that Cornwall will "develop a series of community energy pilots aimed at reducing reliance on national subsidies and embed community energy groups in the fabric of Cornwall's energy system." The partners want to explore new ways to drive investment into energy infrastructure that reduces reliance on national programmes.

Though the initiative has garnered enthusiastic support from councillors and renewable energy campaigners, the fact that none of our participants had heard of it suggests that the council needs to do more to communicate to those who aren't the 'usual suspects.'



### CHECKLIST FOR COUNCILS:

- Before initiating a devolution deal, inform residents about what devolution entails, why the region is considering it and how it could impact them. As much as possible, try to ensure that residents and stakeholders (including voluntary organisations) are kept abreast of developments throughout the process.
- Facilitate opportunities for residents to feedback into the process. Ensure community members and organisations have a chance to have a say through engagement methods that are sufficiently robust and well-publicised such as citizens' assemblies.
- Publish the criteria that will be used to assess devolution deals, when details of negotiations cannot be made public.

### CHECKLIST FOR ACTIVISTS:

- Become familiar with devolution arrangements in the local area. Some include new powers over public transport and energy. This may mean new opportunities to lobby councils for climate-friendly policies or to create them through community-led co-production and co-design.
- Where possible, feed into the devolution process. Councils considering devolution deals are under pressure to improve consultation following criticism from Whitehall over a lack of public engagement. Many councils have already started consultations. Where possible, participate in these processes and ensure that there is clarity of responsibility for environmental issues.

### INSIGHT 2: RESIDENTS WANT TO SEE LOCAL BENEFIT

When it comes to the salience of environmental issues, proximity matters. Climate change and global greenhouse gas emissions consistently rank low on Britons' lists of political priorities. But when framed in terms that are closer to home – local heat waves, toxins in household products, litter on neighbourhood streets – surveys suggest that people demonstrate greater levels of concern.<sup>14</sup>

We found the same to be true in our focus groups. The issues that focus group participants deemed to be the most important to them were those that were considered most relevant to the immediate neighbourhood. When asked to select their top three priorities from a list of environmental initiatives, 'making sure streets are clean with community pick ups and reporting for fly tipping,' and 'protecting parks and green spaces in my neighbourhood,' were in the top priorities for every group (for a full list of options see box 6 and for community-specific ranking see figures 6 and 7). Variation between focus groups depended on the issues that were relevant to the local community. For instance, in Truro several participants said unprompted that plastic and packaging were of major concern to them because it washes up on the local beaches. Nobody in Milton Keynes or Liverpool brought up plastic or packaging, however. Similarly, traffic was discussed as a major issue in Liverpool but not in Truro. A participant in Truro noted that:

*"For us locally, improving air quality is not a huge issue because we're quite lucky in that sense. I think we're also lucky in a sense of plants and trees on the streets and in public places."*

Every break-out group in Truro ranked air quality as least important. But in Liv-



## BOX 6: FOCUS GROUP ACTIVITY

In groups of three, we asked participants to identify the three initiatives that they thought were most important and the three that they thought were least important.

- Protecting parks and green spaces in my neighbourhood
- Improving energy efficiency in flats and homes
- Ensuring recycling is easy for residents
- Providing communal garden space to grow fruits and vegetables
- Cleaning up lakes, rivers and waterways
- Improving air quality
- Generating renewable energy to play our part in combatting climate change
- Making sure streets are clean with community pick ups and reporting for fly tipping
- Promoting walking, cycling and public transit instead of car driving
- Encouraging dog owners to pick up dog waste and fining those who don't
- Planting trees on streets and in public places.

erpool, a larger city with more pollution, one of the groups ranked improving air quality as the most important and none selected it as bottom three.

Participants also felt that those issues that they could impact locally and would bring local benefit were of greater importance to them. This was particularly true when it came to discussing energy. As a man in Milton Keynes put it:

*"I think the reason why we put [generating renewable energy] in the bottom three was probably twofold. One, that it seemed like something that you couldn't tackle easily on a local level and two, that compared with some other areas of the country there's probably less opportunity where Milton Keynes are situated to generate renewable energy in the first place. We're not on the coast. It's not particularly exposed to wind. There's no large waterways that use a dam in some way or*

*whatever. So, out of all the things down there, although I think it's important nationally, it seemed something that in this area you could do less with."*

In Truro, however, though one participant felt that improving energy efficiency had been "done to death a little bit" there was still a sense that they had resources:

*"The first one I think is very important is renewable energy because I wish that we would make more of wave power as we are surrounded by the ocean."*

But again, they want it to be accessible and to see local benefit:

*"We've got these solar farms popping up all over the place, but instead of powering the local village, they're powering the other side of the world. I've often felt that we could get*

FIGURE 6: Most important issues for focus group participants

Issue	Liverpool	Milton Keynes	Truro	Total
Clean streets	2 groups	3 groups	1 group	6
Green spaces	2 groups	1 group	2 groups	5
Recycling	-	1 group	2 groups	3
Dog waste	1 group	2 groups	-	3
Renewable energy	1 group	1 group	1 group	3
Energy efficiency in flats and homes	1 group	1 group	-	2
Walking and cycling	1 group	-	1 group	2
Cleaning up	-	-	1 group	1
Air quality	1 group	-	-	1
Communal garden	-	-	1 group	1



*a community club together and do something like that, power their village, but there isn't a lot in the way of information to work out how accessible something like that actually is."*

Even when there was disagreement about the issues the principle was the same: focusing on local issues with tangible local benefit is important for turning desire into action.

FIGURE 7: Least important issues for focus group participants

Issue	Liverpool	Milton Keynes	Truro	Total
Street trees	2 groups	2 groups	2 groups	6
Communal garden	3 groups	2 groups	-	5
Air quality	-	2 groups	3 groups	5
Dog waste	2 groups	-	1 group	3
Recycling	-	1 group	1 group	2
Energy efficiency in flats and homes	-	-	2 groups	2
Renewable energy	1 group	1 group	-	2
Walking and cycling	-	1 group	-	1

### Emphasise local benefit

So, when developing a campaign, volunteer opportunity or council priority, the yet to be mobilised will be most motivated by local issues. Many councillors we spoke with already acknowledged this. A councillor in Bristol discussing how to engage working class and marginalised communities noted that *"there has to be some benefit in it for them and the community, whether that's through the social ties or the things they produce."* It is therefore important to emphasise the local benefit of all environmental initia-

tives, even those that are part of broader strategies to mitigate climate change. For some district and community energy projects, for example, residents might assume that the power is going elsewhere or that revenues from energy exports aren't being captured, as evidenced by the above participant's scepticism over solar farms *"powering the other side of the world."* It is important that councils and activists communicate how environmental initiatives impact communities and what opportunities there are to get involved.

### CHECKLIST FOR COUNCILS:

- **Emphasise the local benefit for new environmental projects.** This is especially true for projects that might be seen to be external to the community such as solar farms that export some of their energy.
- **Consider how to involve residents in environmental services.** Whether these are litter picks that contribute to clean streets, planting in communal gardens for residents to grow their own food, or community energy projects to produce power, people are motivated by issues they can impact locally – and the council benefits too.

### CHECKLIST FOR ACTIVISTS:

- **When launching a new project or campaign, focus on local issues.** Where possible, ask participants what issues motivate them and where they feel they could have the most impact.
- **Understand the rights of community organisations.** The Localism Act 2011 enshrines voluntary groups and community organisations with new rights over service provision in the community. Research what this means for your group and if there are opportunities to take on initiatives, aligned to your goals.

---

### INSIGHT 3: PEOPLE NEED PERMISSION TO ACT

The idea that we can impact issues and decisions in our communities may seem obvious to elected representatives and the politically engaged. But for many people, especially those that have been marginalised, taking action to address an issue is an alien concept. It simply may not occur to them. This is a reasonable response to repeated political alienation. The Young Foundation has described the way that perceptions of who is responsible and who gets to influence change can affect an individual's belief in their own political power.<sup>15</sup> Many people don't feel they have 'permission' to act in the way that those familiar with political processes or activist strategies take for granted, through their education, cultural capital and social networks. They need to discover that community action is possible and viable.

As described in the previous chapter, in each of our focus groups participants reported that just discussing the issues and envisioning how they might participate made them realise that community action was possible. In other words, participating in the focus group gave them permission to act: it let them know that there were opportunities to improve their local environment and that those opportunities were available to people like them.

#### Go to where people are

To receive permission to act, local people need to be informed. In our focus groups, several participants said that they lacked the information to even begin to get involved. As one person in Truro put it:

*"I wouldn't know where the public outputs of information are to try and find the people... if you live in a small village and there's an environmental issue, who, where, what, how do you start to tackle it?"*

A woman in Milton Keynes agreed:

*"[You need to] have someone to start the ball rolling. If you don't know what you're doing it's, how do you go about it? Nobody tells you these sort of things. How do you start up a group and that?"*

Therefore, several participants felt that it was important for councillors and activists to come to them. As a woman in Truro noted:

*"If they're consulting you the onus is on them to contact you, and sometimes you're not going to seek information, you might not even know you're interested in it... You're not going to know anything happens unless, you almost need it there in your face. For example, if I was walking through town in front of the cathedral and there was an exhibition about something, then I might think that sounds interesting, then if I want to find out more, I would."*

Many councillors we spoke with agreed that they needed to reach out. When describing the process of engaging hard to reach communities, for example, a councillor in Peterborough stated:

*"[Engagement] means communicating in non-local authority or central government type language and it also means going out into their communities rather than expecting them to come see you because the reality is they probably won't come in to the town hall or the city hall or wherever it is that you hold public meetings. You need to go talk to them about community services and set up community engagement groups and then you can encourage them to come to the main participation things."*

Participants disagreed about the best way to reach out to them. For younger participants in particular, they seemed to think that online mechanisms were the

most effective way to engage them. As a man in Milton Keynes put it:

*"I'm not going to walk into a planning office and ask for loads of plans on something, but I can go online and check to see what's going on up the road by a couple of click of the button."*

Other participants felt that social media would be the most effective way to reach them. A 29-year-old in Truro said that the consultation methods that most councils used, for instance, disappointed him:

*"[It] makes you wonder how interested they are in the answer because if they were really interested in the volume of responses and the participation and opinion, they would use social media because certainly for my generation it's the way of getting the broadest opinion. It's the way of getting the most responses, and yet you never see a planning application, there's no planning in Cornwall page on Facebook, is there?"*

This participant's criticism was partly correct. Some evidence suggests that social media is underused by councillors. According to the Local Government Association, 54 per cent of adults in the UK are using social media but fewer than one fifth of councillors are.<sup>16</sup> The LGA's work on digital councils reports that councillors opting out of Facebook and Twitter for fear of constituent harassment or a lack of understanding are missing important engagement and feedback opportunities. But as it turns out, both Cornwall Council and Truro City Council have active Facebook pages. The Truro participant's unfamiliarity with their social media channels illustrates the weakness of most online tools: community members need to know they are there and be connected in order to make use of them. This weakness was recognised by several participants. When it came to council consultations, for

example, participants were asked to rank which methods they thought were most effective and about half of the focus group participants ranked offline methods like ‘public exhibitions, displays, road shows’ and ‘local media and press releases’ above online consultation portals. The same was true for the environmental activists we surveyed (see figure 8).

Focus group participants who favoured offline mechanisms said they were more important than online consultation portals because you don’t have to actively seek them out, they may “hit you in the face.” A man in Milton Keynes explained:

*“You’re not going to proactively go [to an online consultation portal] unless you’ve got either media or questionnaires through your door or public exhibitions telling you what’s on there ... I don’t go online once a week to see what Milton Keynes are consulting about. I’ve got better things to do. So, although it’s a useful tool, in terms of ranked order of importance, for us it ranked below those other three.”*

Two participants also noted that they either didn’t have computers or weren’t computer literate so online mechanisms were inaccessible for them.

To make the best use of in-person outreach methods it is important that councillors and activists bring engagement to the people rather than expecting people to come to them. Participants seemed to favour methods that they could ‘stumble upon’ like street stalls and community notice boards. In Milton Keynes some participants said that they usually used community notice boards to find out about events and issues, and they were disappointed that some had been removed recently and were being used less frequently. Effective community notice boards should be put in places that residents frequent: pubs, post offices, libraries, schools, bus stops, places of worship. Similarly, in each group some participants said that they need a neighbour or a councillor to knock on their door and invite them to get involved in order for them to take action. A woman in Milton Keynes put it like this:

*“I look for somebody that’ll come knock on my door and say, ‘Oh, do you want to do this today?’ and I’ll say, ‘Oh, yes. Let’s go do it’ and I would, but I wouldn’t be able to do it myself. I wouldn’t be able to say, ‘Oh, come on. Let’s go do cleaning up or whatever,’ but if somebody said it to me, I would be ready to do it.”*

Finally, it is important to tap into existing networks and communities that aren’t already connected to environmental issues, such as faith communities or parents’ groups. A councillor in Leeds said that during the flooding in 2015 several people got involved in the clean-up who weren’t usually environmentally active. In particular, two churches and a mosque mobilised their congregations to participate in flood clean-up. Some evidence indicates that engagement in one sphere of environmental activity, like flood clean-up, may inspire further engagement in other environmental work in so far as it acts as an entry point for thinking about conservation.<sup>17</sup> This helps build and extend participatory culture by

**FIGURE 8: Most effective ways for councils to engage community members**

*“Which of the following do you believe is the most effective way for councils to engage community members in environmental decision making? Please drag and drop to represent them in order of preference.”*

Communication method	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
Public exhibitions, displays, road shows	26%	26%	18%	14%	9%	6%	<b>2.73</b>
Local media and press releases	29%	21%	17%	13%	10%	10%	<b>2.87</b>
Questionnaires or response forms	15%	18%	21%	17%	15%	14%	<b>3.42</b>
Consultation portal – an online facility for viewing and responding to consultation documents	14%	15%	17%	19%	17%	17%	<b>3.62</b>
Meetings and stakeholder events	10%	12%	16%	19%	22%	20%	<b>3.92</b>
Inviting experts and stakeholders to share information with councillors	6%	9%	11%	17%	25%	32%	<b>4.44</b>

*Based on our online survey of 7,410 environmental campaigners*

bringing in segments of the population who can then mobilise others. Given that the literature on volunteer sustainability consistently links social ties and relationship bonds with long-term commitment to an organisation or activity,<sup>18</sup> facilitating opportunities for people to connect in person is critical. It means 'going where the people are' so they can bring others to you.

### Identify and support local leaders

Local leadership is a key condition for engaging the yet to be mobilised and making them feel they have permission to act. In each of our focus groups participants indicated that having someone to take the lead was crucial for ensuring their participation. "You need a driving force," said one man in Milton Keynes. His co-participant agreed, describing the impact that having a leader in the community could have:

*"I think in those situations, there's usually one person who is really proactive. So, for where I live, the local minister is highly driven to do anything she can in the community and that doesn't even ever go into religion and there are no kind of connections really with the church. She's driven to do that and so things have built and rapidly moved forward because of one person really and she's targeted people who she thinks have got the right skillsets to do things. So, there's a community group in our area that's been set up on the basis of what she's done, basically."*

In some cases, ward or parish councillors, or established community activists are best placed to act as the community leaders that do the necessary outreach. If this is the case, it is incumbent upon leaders to ensure that they are taking on appropriate outreach mechanisms. A councillor from Leicester also suggested that 'gatekeepers' in the community can be especially effective for engaging the hard to reach. He said:

*"In every community initiative there are gatekeepers, there are people who hold knowledge. You need to tap into them and they need to enable others to get involved. So, in a children's home for example where you've got young people who are cared for in their mid to late teens, you'd obviously go through the gatekeepers who are the people running the children's home in that type of initiative."*

In other instances, however, local people may not identify with councillors, activists or gatekeepers if they are seen as a politician or a 'usual suspect' instead of a neighbour. Research has established that the perception of cliques can act as a powerful barrier to taking environmental action.<sup>19</sup> Several focus group participants commented that it was often the same people who tended to get involved, which made others feel unwelcome. As a woman in Liverpool noted:

*"There's a group of people, [involved in a park protection campaign] but they just tend to do it all themselves. I know them, so if something is going on maybe they should just go out there and let people know and I think more people might join in if they did."*

The survey we conducted with environmental campaigners revealed that most activists are unaware that perceived cliques can act as a disincentive for engagement. When we asked "For those community members who do not participate in environmental initiatives what do you believe are the main reasons that they don't?" the least popular response (22 per cent) was "They believe that those involved in environmental work are not like them."

Therefore, councils and community groups should work together to invest in processes that train people who are interested in engaging more deeply. This could take the form of workshops where people are trained in leading community groups

or managing environmental goods, or 'community champions' programmes where groups of residents are given leadership over a particular issue and help to promote the issue and solutions to other residents. The neighbourhood planning process, which is now a right for all communities to take up if they choose, may be a good place to identify and support new community leaders.



**Local leadership is a key condition for engaging the yet to be mobilised and making them feel they have permission to act. In each of our focus groups participants indicated that having someone to take the lead was crucial for ensuring their participation**



### CASE STUDY 3: CREATING NEW LEADERS IN PRACTICE: ESSEX REPAIR AND RE-USE BUS

In light of reduced local authority funding, Essex County Council partnered with online crowdfunding platform Spacehive to create Essex Hive, “a singular place to bring together grant funders, public agencies, businesses and communities to fund local projects that benefit local people.” The aim was to train local residents to attract funding from “every available source” for projects that create vibrant and prosperous communities.

A group of retired men in Colchester attended a council-run workshop on

crowdfunding. They had noticed that there was an increasing amount of unwanted household goods going to the landfill so they decided to help local residents repair and reuse their household items to prevent them from ending up in the tip. They started by waiting at the landfill and when people arrived with repairable items they would offer to fix it instead of throw it away. The men then began running regular workshops at the library to teach people how to repair their own household items. They have

now launched a crowdfunding page on Essex Hive and are trying to raise money for a van so that they can collect dumped white goods to repair and resell or recycle them, for the expansion of their workshops and for services to rural villages in Essex.

The training opportunity that the Council provided was critical to upskilling new people, connecting communities, and ultimately for improving the environment.

### CASE STUDY 4: CREATING NEW LEADERS IN PRACTICE: STEVENAGE GREEN SPACES VOLUNTEER INITIATIVE

The Green Spaces Volunteer (GSV) initiative was launched in Spring 2011 in response to a growing interest from local residents to become actively involved in the maintenance and management of green spaces. In the past five years GSV's volunteer numbers have increased by 200 per cent and the number of hours they give by over 2,250 per cent.

The GSV volunteers undertake improvements that add value to what the Council is able to deliver - improving accessibility, developing wildlife habitats, raising awareness of environmental issues, undertaking wildlife monitoring, and assisting with the delivery of fun, educational community events aimed at engaging with young families in the town.

The council facilitates opportunities for multiple types and levels of participation: “To make the scheme as accessible as possible we keep the programme as flexible as possible, inviting volunteers to attend for as much, or as little, time as they can afford. Whether a volunteer has one hour

or four hours to volunteer, everybody's help is welcomed and valued. Some volunteers come out to almost every activity, others take part in sessions closest to their home, while others come out to habitats that they are most interested in, woodlands for example. We aim to keep activities fun, sociable, informative, and deliverable so that volunteers enjoy the activity and can see the positive difference that they have made at the end of each session.”

They also provide training opportunities linked to the type of activities and sites that volunteers are interested in. During the past two years volunteers have had an opportunity to take part in training that has included butterfly surveys, first aid, pond dipping for adults, manual handling and back care, leading volunteer activities, and coppicing. In 2015 they created a ‘Lead Volunteer’ role which allows volunteers to develop skills and take on more ownership. As a result, the organisation's capacity increased because they were able to open up mid-week volunteering.

“To make the scheme as accessible as possible we keep the programme as flexible as possible, inviting volunteers to attend for as much, or as little, time as they can afford”





#### **INSIGHT 4: PARTICIPATION NEEDS TO FIT WITH EVERYDAY LIVES**

Time poverty is consistently cited as a key barrier to participating in environmental action. When a sample of the public was asked in a 2014 Fabian Society poll to list the most important reasons why people are *not* likely to be involved in social / community action to improve the environment in the place where they live, “I don’t have the time” was the most popular answer (47 per cent). Among the yet to be mobilised, however, this barrier seems to be surmountable if the correct action is taken. Only five of the 28 participants across the three groups agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “I don’t have time to participate in community environmental initiatives.” Even some of them were prepared to qualify this statement, saying that they would be able to participate if it was compatible with their everyday lives. The types of participation, the level of commitment, and the accessibility of the activity all appeared to be more determinative of whether they would take environmental action than time itself.

#### **Make participation accessible**

For many focus group participants, their interest in future involvement depended on whether the activity was accessible. Of course, the factors that made participation accessible varied for different people with different life circumstances. For instance, participants who had children indicated that family involvement was important. A woman in Liverpool put it like this:

*“I’ve got three young children. So, if there was something that did take some time, if we could all go and do something. So, if it was in my local park or if it was in community allotments or spaces or something that young children would be welcome at, then I’d obviously have a lot more time than if I had to try and find someone to have my kids, so*

#### **CHECKLIST FOR COUNCILS:**

- **Think creatively about how to engage people and present information.** Don’t shy away from traditional tools that allow people to ‘stumble upon’ your information.
- **Facilitate training opportunities.** Host workshops in the community. Make sure they are widely advertised and accessible.
- **Create a ‘community champions programme’ for specific issues.** This is where residents are invited to take leadership on an issue of importance and engage their fellow neighbours.
- **Develop community forums.** These are neighbourhood or themed based groups of people that meet to address a particular issue over a sustained period of time.

#### **CHECKLIST FOR ACTIVISTS:**

- **Beware of relying on established social media networks.** They can be good to connect with your core base but they often reinforce the ‘echo chamber.’
- **Invest in skill-building.** Host campaigning workshops and development sessions.
- **Identify and connect in person with community groups you haven’t before.** These could be schools, parents groups, outdoor exercise clubs or faith communities. They are likely to have wide networks of untapped potential.
- **Establish opportunities for ownership through lead volunteer initiatives.**

---

*that I could go and do something. Yes, I think I'd have the time if it didn't have a negative impact on my family."*

Others brought up different factors that would help participation fit with their lives: the physical effort required, venues or meeting points being close to their home, available transport to meetings or events, and short and flexible time commitments.

For people with limited time, sometimes engaging online makes participation in council consultations or neighbourhood improvement more accessible. Several councils have recently begun to develop apps to facilitate more community feedback and communication. The New Forest District Council, for instance, has the New Forest 'In Touch' app that allows residents to report flytipping, pest problems, dog fouling and other environ-

mental concerns all hours of the week. Lewisham, Oldham, Derry, Leicester and York have similar apps. In the first three years, Lewisham's 'LoveLewisham' graffiti and flytipping reporting app led to an eight per cent decrease in graffiti and a 30 per cent drop in graffiti-related complaints.<sup>20</sup>

### **Diversify participation opportunities**

Because people's life circumstances and interests vary, it is important to facilitate participation opportunities that fit with a variety of lifestyles and schedules. Councils and community groups might also find that different issues demand different types of engagement. The classic ladder of participation (originally conceived by Sherry Arnstein but adapted for this report, figure 9) categorises the forms of participation that a public body or community group might initiate. We

have adapted it to include insights from this report and offer examples of what different participation mechanisms in each rung of the ladder could look like.

**Because people's life circumstances and interests vary, it is important to facilitate participation opportunities that fit with a variety of lifestyles and schedules. Councils and community groups might also find that different issues demand different types of engagement.**





FIGURE 9: Ladder of participation (adapted from Sherry Arnstein's classic Ladder of Citizen Participation)

Form of participation		Examples	Risks	How to avoid
Doing things with people in equal partnership	Co-production	<i>Community reference groups:</i> Groups of citizens and stakeholders are established to meet and direct the development of a service or programme. They may then deliver the service or programme themselves in partnership with the council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power may just be turned over to small groups of self-appointed citizens</li> <li>• Could lead to unaccountable decision making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embed accountability mechanisms</li> <li>• Make sure all residents can feedback on decisions</li> </ul>
	Co-design	<i>Community procurement processes:</i> Residents create and submit proposals for a programme or service and then councillors and community members assess and select them		
Engaging and involving people through active participation	Active decision making	<i>Citizens' juries/assemblies:</i> A group of people representing the community are selected to consider an issue. They are not experts but are presented with all the information and then make recommendations about the issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals can be inaccessible to the wider community</li> <li>• Can be very time consuming for participants, and officers need to value and support this contribution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publish details of process and decision rationale then offer whole community opportunity to feedback on recommendations</li> <li>• Compensate people for their time if resources allow</li> </ul>
	Engagement	<i>Champions programmes:</i> People are selected or put themselves forward to take leadership on a particular issue and then report back to the council or group new initiatives and progress made on the issue		
Asking for residents inputs and views	Consultation	<i>Public meeting:</i> Residents are invited to share their views in a public forum  <i>Online consultation portal:</i> Residents are invited to share their views in an online poll or feedback form	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Views may not be representative of the community</li> <li>• May leave participants feeling more cynical and disengaged if they feel their feedback doesn't make any difference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embed mechanisms for how feedback will be incorporated before a process begins and communicate this to councillors and participants</li> <li>• Communicate to participants how their feedback was used in decision making after the fact</li> </ul>
Doing things for people without asking their views	Educating	<i>Workshops:</i> Inviting residents for training and discussion on a particular topic or skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to get hard to reach groups to</li> <li>• Can require significant time and resources</li> <li>• May not have the expertise within the council to deliver</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Host workshops in areas where hard to reach groups are and consider compensations</li> <li>• Recruit face-to-face</li> <li>• Commission workshop facilitators with expertise (can also help build community leaders)</li> </ul>
	Informing	<i>Community notice boards:</i> Public displays with information about community events and organisations in places people frequent (pubs, post offices, libraries, schools)  <i>Street stalls:</i> Setting up a table and information in a public area to connect with residents		



The best participation processes will allow for multi-type participation where citizens who prefer to dip in and out and citizens who favour taking the lead can engage

Frequently, a council or community group might choose to employ multiple levels of participation. For instance, a council may need to inform residents about a recycling programme or an energy retrofit. In so doing they are working at the lowest rung of the participation ladder. They might also seek the input and views of local people on the energy retrofit, however, or even work alongside residents and community organisations to run a community energy scheme, thus moving up to co-design and co-production. The best participation processes will allow for multi-type participation where citizens who prefer to dip in and out *and* citizens who favour taking the lead can engage.

Though it is often assumed that higher levels of participation are better, councils should be cautious and deliberate when initiating co-design and co-production. While they help to develop community leaders and will hopefully improve services, they also risk handing over power to a small group of self-selected or appointed individuals who aren't accountable in the same way that elected representatives are. This does little to engage the yet to be mobilised and may actually foster a sense of exclusion.<sup>21</sup> These type of equal partnership arrangements are becoming more common, as illustrated by the expansion of 'co-operative councils' in recent years. At their best, they catalyse deep and meaningful involvement from a cross-section of the community. But

#### **CASE STUDY 5: FACILITATING MULTI-TYPE PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE: ESTATE GREENING AT ST. GEORGE'S IN TOWER HAMLETS**

In St George's estate in Shadwell, in London's east end in 2012, estate residents approached the organisation, Trees for Cities and their landlord to improve the estate by transforming previously underused communal green spaces. In partnership with the organisation and the landlord, resident leaders then organised community planting days where 162 people helped to plant trees, shrubs, perennials and grasses in and around the estate to create a beautiful outdoor living environment. The St George's estate transformation includes a wildflower meadow, a wildlife garden and a natural play area. There's also a community orchard which provides

a diverse habitat for wildlife and a lovely space for residents to garden and forage. The project benefits all 2,000 residents in the estate. Three residents attended Trees for Cities' on-site horticulture training workshops to give them the skills and confidence to help maintain the plants. Through these sessions, residents learn about tree pruning and identification and treatment of tree pests and diseases. The project demonstrates multi-level participation: some residents took on leadership roles, which allowed them to bring on several other residents who preferred operating on a supportive level.

#### **CASE STUDY 6: EFFECTIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE CO-DESIGN IN PRACTICE: LAMBETH EDIBLE BUS STOP**

In the London Borough of Lambeth, the council invited community members to design transport infrastructure improvements after a planning dispute in 2011. A community member became aware of a planning proposal that would have seen the neighbourhood's one green space built upon. She and her neighbours objected to the proposal and guerrilla gardened the space. After the plan was rejected, the council posted a call for people to submit proposals to

formalise and redesign the site. At two public consultation days local residents were able to state their preferences and reactions to those shortlisted. This embeds an accountability measure into residents' decision making and designing capacities but doesn't sacrifice the participatory benefit of having residents produce designs themselves. They then created the 'Edible Bus Stop,' which is now a widely used award-winning garden on public land.

councils should be wary of assuming that co-production and co-design always represent the gold standard of engagement. Frequently they are merely a means of devolving responsibility to the 'usual suspects' without the electoral consent of the community. When embarking on pro-

cesses of co-production and co-design it is therefore critical that councillors are clear about what the purpose of the process is and what accountability and transparency mechanisms are in place.

## CHECKLIST FOR COUNCILS:

- **Ensure that residents have multiple ways to participate in council activity.** Some residents value feeding into council decisions whereas others would prefer to connect with their councillors through community events, for example. It's important that the council makes it clear that there are opportunities to do both and doesn't limit their engagement methods to consultations only.
- **Consider where you can facilitate deeper participation.** The lowest level of participation is informing and educating residents. Where possible, create opportunities for residents to engage using participatory mechanisms such as neighbourhood forums and citizens' juries. Or, where appropriate create opportunities for residents to co-design and co-produce council initiatives and projects. This may mean procuring project ideas from residents and then selecting the best proposals or appointing a reference group that develops service improvements through deliberative processes to present to the council.

## CHECKLIST FOR ACTIVISTS:

- **Make sure initiatives allow for different types of participation.** Different participants will want to engage in different ways. Don't design campaigns or volunteer initiatives where everyone is required to do the same. Ensure that there are at least some flexible opportunities and some opportunities for more responsibility.
- **When engaging new volunteers or activists, ask what they would like to do.** Often people have their own expectations for their involvement. You can only meet these expectations if you know what they are.
- **Research opportunities for co-production in your community and contact your council to discuss.** Organisations with capacity have more opportunity than ever to launch and design new initiatives. You may want to reach out to other organisations who have launched community energy projects or participated in neighbourhood enhancement plans to see how they did it. Then, contact the council cabinet member with a relevant portfolio and ask how best to take your idea forward.

## INSIGHT 5: PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW THEIR PARTICIPATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Above all else, participants want to feel that their efforts actually matter. This applies on both a project-wide basis, seeing tangible results from the project or campaign, and an individual basis, believing that their role in particular is needed. Much of the research on volunteer and activist sustainability suggests that having one's expectations satisfied early on and seeing tangible outcomes is a key motivator for continued participation.<sup>22</sup> Many of the campaigners who responded to our survey also described early victory experiences that were motivating or inspiring. As a long-term activist wrote:

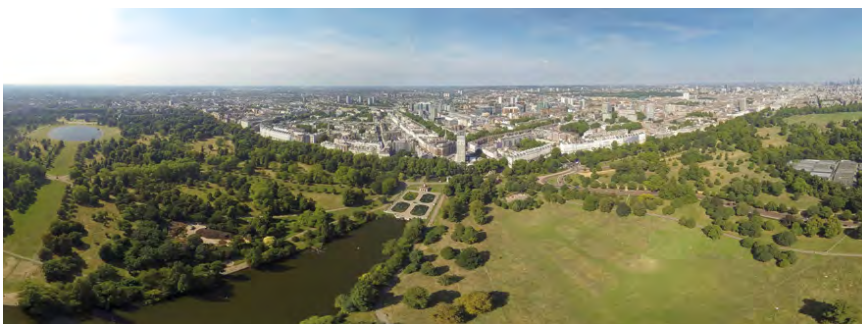
*"Twenty years ago, Hammersmith Council were very supportive of our local project to reclaim small bomb-sites and other waste land, tying in with local schools to achieve environmental awareness and fun. The key was having an excellent facilitator with true green/ people-focussed skills... All the volunteers really participated to the level of their abilities and were genuinely valued; enjoyment and being part of a successful enterprise were our reward and it made me want to keep going."*

In our focus groups, some participants indicated that they "didn't want to waste their energy" but if they could see tangible improvements in the places where they lived then it would appear worthwhile. A woman in Liverpool summed it up:

*"I'd get involved if I believed my involvement would make a difference."*

## Communicate the difference participation makes

There was a sense in all focus groups that participating in some environmental initiatives, particularly certain council



processes, could be futile. Some said they had not bothered participating in council consultations because they felt that the council would ignore their input anyway. For those who had participated, there was a sense that it could be “just a formality.” A participant in Truro even told a story of attending a public meeting about a planning decision where one of the councillors was asleep. Evidence suggests that these types of poorly executed participation mechanisms – where people are invited to engage but don’t feel that their input has any impact – can reinforce feelings of disempowerment among citizens, leaving them more cynical and less trusting of elected representatives than before they participated.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, no consultation is better than a poorly-executed consultation which will harm community relations and democratic engagement.

However, others, especially those in Milton Keynes, spoke about instances where their participation did make a difference, which made them want to participate further. One man said that when he heard back from the council indicating that his feedback wasn’t just received but how it impacted the issue then it “*kind of reinforces the fact that you’ve got a say.*” He said that the council wrote to him summarising the results of their resident survey and then explained the decision they came to. His co-participant told a similar story:

*“From my point of view, getting that feedback and knowing what was happening and being kept in the loop definitely made me think, Okay. Well, if something else comes along, I’m definitely going to get involved, because they’re proactively keeping you involved in it.”*

Therefore, ensuring that residents are aware of how their participation impacts outcomes is crucial. Similarly, volunteers or participants in a campaign need to be



told how their participation does and can make a difference.

### **Embed impact in all decision making**

Frequently, council consultation or engagement methods are assumed to allow for citizen input but do not have formal pathways embedded to ensure that community participation has any bearing on the decision. As a Social Market Foundation report puts it:

*“The concern is that there is no clear line from participation to power. In most instances in local government, ultimately decision making accountability lies with elected members rather than the people who have participated or the officers who have conducted such exercises. The problem is that elected members are too often not engaged in the participatory mechanisms and will often fail to take account of them and the views expressed through them.”<sup>24</sup>*

Worryingly, the report then goes on to warn that current enthusiasm for participatory methods may actually be undermining respect for democratic engagement insofar as it raises citizens’ hopes and then fosters disillusionment when they see that their participation has no impact. It is therefore critical that local authorities consider and formalise the ways that participatory mechanisms will be incorporated into decision making before beginning community engagement.

**Current enthusiasm for participatory methods may actually be undermining respect for democratic engagement insofar as it raises citizens’ hopes and then fosters disillusionment when they see that their participation has no impact**



### CHECKLIST FOR COUNCILS:

- **Determine how participative methods will be used in decision making and make this explicit before any community engagement process begins.** This also needs to be made clear to individual councillors.
- **Follow up any consultation or engagement process detailing the results.** Be clear about the empirical evidence that was gathered so residents know how other residents responded and why a council made the decision it did. In regular communications, include a 'you said, we did' column where you demonstrate how resident input consistently shapes council initiatives and services.

### CHECKLIST FOR ACTIVISTS:

- **Research council community engagement processes.** If it is not explicit, ask what the councils' mechanisms for incorporating participation are.
- **Contact councillors about initiating partnership boards and reference groups for environmental projects.** They allow residents and organisations to play a more active role in decision making.
- **Get involved in your area's neighbourhood planning process to ensure environmental considerations are incorporated into new plans.** As of 2011, communities in England have a right to neighbourhood planning. Many councils have developed local or

neighbourhood plans with groups of residents that are reviewed on a regular basis. Find out what your council's process is and feed in to it.

- **Don't engage new activists or volunteers in long-term campaigns where victory is unlikely to be realised.** Instead, focus on 'quick win' campaigns and projects that deliver tangible results.







## ENDNOTES

1. When asked in 2014 “Thinking realistically about your everyday life and how you like to spend your free time, how likely or unlikely (or neither) are you to be involved with community action to improve the environment in the place where you live?”, 30 per cent of poll respondents said they were likely to be involved. <http://www.fabians.org.uk/publications/pride-of-place/>
2. In the financial year ending 2012, over 6 in 10 (63.3 per cent) people aged 16 and over in the UK agreed or strongly agreed that they belonged to their neighbourhood, a deterioration from financial year ending 2010 (66.0 per cent). <https://www.ons.gov.uk/people-populationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/measuringnationalwellbeing/2016#how-do-we-feel-about-where-we-live>
3. <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/5854661/Under+pressure.pdf>
4. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/Summary-Final.pdf>
5. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/Summary-Final.pdf>
6. <http://www.involve.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Empowerment-Economy-Final-Report2.pdf>
7. Civic participation is defined as “engagement in democratic processes either in person or online” <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-life-survey-2015-to-2016-data>
8. The government’s Community Life Survey 2015–16 indicates that 41 per cent of people in England volunteered at least once in the last year. The most recent publicly available data on the types of organisations that people volunteer for is from the now defunct Office for the Third Sector’s 2007 report, ‘Helping Out: A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving’ [http://www.ivr.org.uk/images/stories/Institute-of-Volunteering-Research/Migrated-Resources/Documents/H/OTS\\_Helping\\_Out.pdf](http://www.ivr.org.uk/images/stories/Institute-of-Volunteering-Research/Migrated-Resources/Documents/H/OTS_Helping_Out.pdf). At that time, 8% of those who volunteered (so approximately 3.2 per cent of the whole population) did so for a ‘conservation, environment or heritage’ organisation.
9. <http://www.fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Pride-of-Place.pdf>
10. <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/Publication-Disconnected-Citizens-Is-Community-Empowerment-the-Solution.pdf>
11. The BBC article that focus group participants were given can be found here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-33542592>
12. <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmcomloc/369/36902.htm>
13. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/publications/tabs/unit-publications/168>
14. Devinney, T., P. Auger, and R. De Saille. “What Matters to Citizens of the United Kingdom: Social, Political and Economic Values.” (2013).
15. [https://issuu.com/youngfoundation/docs/valuing\\_place\\_final\\_designed\\_report](https://issuu.com/youngfoundation/docs/valuing_place_final_designed_report)
16. <http://www.local.gov.uk/digital-councils/get-started>
17. Church, C. (2007) Changed Places, Changed Lives: The social impacts of environmental action. BTCV,
18. <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tsrc/documents/tsrc/discussion-papers/discussion-paper-b-community-engagement.pdf>
19. [http://www.psi.org.uk/pdf/2015/social\\_research\\_review\\_big\\_society.pdf](http://www.psi.org.uk/pdf/2015/social_research_review_big_society.pdf)
20. [http://www.psi.org.uk/pdf/2015/social\\_research\\_review\\_big\\_society.pdf](http://www.psi.org.uk/pdf/2015/social_research_review_big_society.pdf)
21. *ibid*
22. [http://www.psi.org.uk/pdf/2015/social\\_research\\_review\\_big\\_society.pdf](http://www.psi.org.uk/pdf/2015/social_research_review_big_society.pdf)
23. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/social-policy-and-society/article/div-classtitlemarginalised-or-enabled-voices-user-participation-in-policy-and-practicediv/350F5E2A2BB7AEF36C23BAF62733DBE9>
24. <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/Publication-Disconnected-Citizens-Is-Community-Empowerment-the-Solution.pdf>



