

Opinion: *Catriona Riddell* -----



COVID-19 EXPERIENCE PROVIDES PLAN-MAKERS WITH OPPORTUNITY TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT

One of the positive by-products of our Covid-19 experience has been the welcome opportunity to get to know our neighbours and wider communities better – something that has been helped enormously by the use of digital technology.

People from all generations are now far more proficient at using social media and video calls to catch up with their neighbours, friends and family members, making life in lockdown a little bit more bearable. So how do we harness this new-found community spirit and ability to engage with each other in different ways, and use it to improve the way that we plan?

Until now, social media and technology have been used largely by local communities to fight against planning proposals. Local residents' tweets about planning in their areas do not usually make for good reading. Social media has made it much easier for local communities to voice their opinions, frustrated by the limited opportunity they feel they have to influence decisions through the formal process. Well-organised and informed campaign groups can therefore have a major impact on the outcome of planning decisions and can fundamentally shift the nature of local politics through the election process, as many councillors know to their cost.

Councils are expected to set out how they intend to engage with local communities in preparing a local plan through a statement of community involvement. They are required to consult formally at only two key stages in the process. It is, of course, up to individual local authorities as to whether they go beyond the minimum requirements, but many have neither the expertise nor the resources to go any further than this. Regardless, consultations should not be treated as a tick-box exercise nor as market research, but as part of the local plan evidence base and a positive part of the place-shaping process.

If the government is serious about making the system faster and fairer through the promised planning reforms, a new contract of engagement is needed to ensure that plans are prepared in collaboration with all sectors of the local community, using their extensive knowledge and experience of the places where they live and work to inform priorities from the start, not just at key stages. There are, sadly, not a

huge number of good examples of effective engagement in plan-making out there. But there are some, especially using digital technology, that could be used to help develop good practice nationally.

Effective engagement should be resourced properly, not just financially but with people who have the right skills. This additional investment will pay dividends in the longer term if the local community is on board with the plan and is not sitting in opposition at the examination table with a thoroughly briefed legal team.

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However, for this to work properly, there needs to be a more honest and transparent relationship between councils and their local communities. Some decisions will still need to be made in the interests of the greater good, especially as public funding becomes increasingly limited, and difficult choices will need to be made.

It should also be acknowledged that no plan starts with a clean sheet of paper because some decisions will be made by others outside the council's sphere of influence. Again, an honest and open discussion around this will help defuse much of the debate and challenge, making it clear where local communities have a say and where they will have limited influence.

Our new-found sense of community as a result of the Covid-19 experience has given us a real opportunity to do things differently in future, using the tools, technology and networks that have been put in place to facilitate proper community engagement in plan-making. It would be a shame not to embrace this to help build places fit for the future. *Catriona Riddell is strategic planning convenor for the Planning Officers Society and a freelance consultant*