



ARE ACTIONS SPEAKING AS LOUD AS WORDS?

The challenge and opportunity of 21st century
community engagement

ABSTRACT

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Working Paper No. 1 August 2022

Are actions speaking as loud as words? The challenge and opportunity of 21st century community engagement

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There's currently no shortage of comment across all sectors – public, voluntary and business – on the need to engage communities in an increasingly purposeful fashion. The function of effective engagement is an embedded component of flagship policies that aspire to level up 'left-behind' communities.

The re-design of social care, integrated health care provision, reviews of local government and policy directives that aim to tackle organised crime, radicalisation and reduce crimes against women are but a few examples of the emphasis on the engaged community to be an active part of solutions.

This ambition is writ large in local authority plans and voluntary sector offers, and is often vocalised as being central to policing philosophies the length and breadth of the country. Businesses are increasingly understanding that engaging with local communities provides opportunity to demonstrate their social value credentials, and be seen as the developer or contractor of choice. Community engagement sits centre stage as the method by which ambitions can be built and developed.

Now more than ever, leaders are exposed to widening gaps in service provision, and are increasingly vulnerable to critical failures that shatter lives, and rapidly erode perceptions of trust, legitimacy and reputation.

Which is why, now more than ever, we believe there is a need to apply the available evidence and learning to deliver on the expectations of effective community engagement in the 21st century.

This emphasis on the importance of community engagement voiced in so many sound-bites and strategies suggests it is both understood as a process, and is being performed effectively by the many organisations who place it as central to their role. But can leaders really be that confident?'

Testing, testing

In the last decade we have co-designed, researched and implemented many community engagement strategies and tactics across the UK. Working with leaders and communities, we have helped introduce local responses to challenges including serious and organised crime, anti-social behaviour, violence and neighbourhood crimes.

We have often worked in places where resources are stretched and existing engagement between police, service providers and communities is fragmented; along the way we have been able to share our findings with leaders and stakeholders at national, international and local levels.

[Our research](#) has described and explored the effective application of key techniques and practices as a part of a consistent and repeatable community engagement approach contained within an [eight-step framework](#).

That research, undertaken over a decade and with more than 15 different specific projects around the UK, involved many hundreds of community members, police officers, community workers, local authority staff, schoolteachers, youth workers, religious leaders and young people.

It was action-research – in other words, we carried out the research while we were doing the community engagement. We worked alongside community organisations in deprived neighbourhoods, helping them to understand their situations, finding people who can achieve on behalf of the community, and designing new interventions that tackled the super complex ‘wicked issues’ that they faced.

We sought out what made the projects work; not all of them did, because of time constraints, lack of critical mass or some other external factor, and we were just as interested in what made projects fail as what made them succeed.

Eventually we were able to identify and test 26 key activities or processes that contribute in different combinations to make community-based projects work. We also thoroughly road-tested our eight-step process (Figure 1).

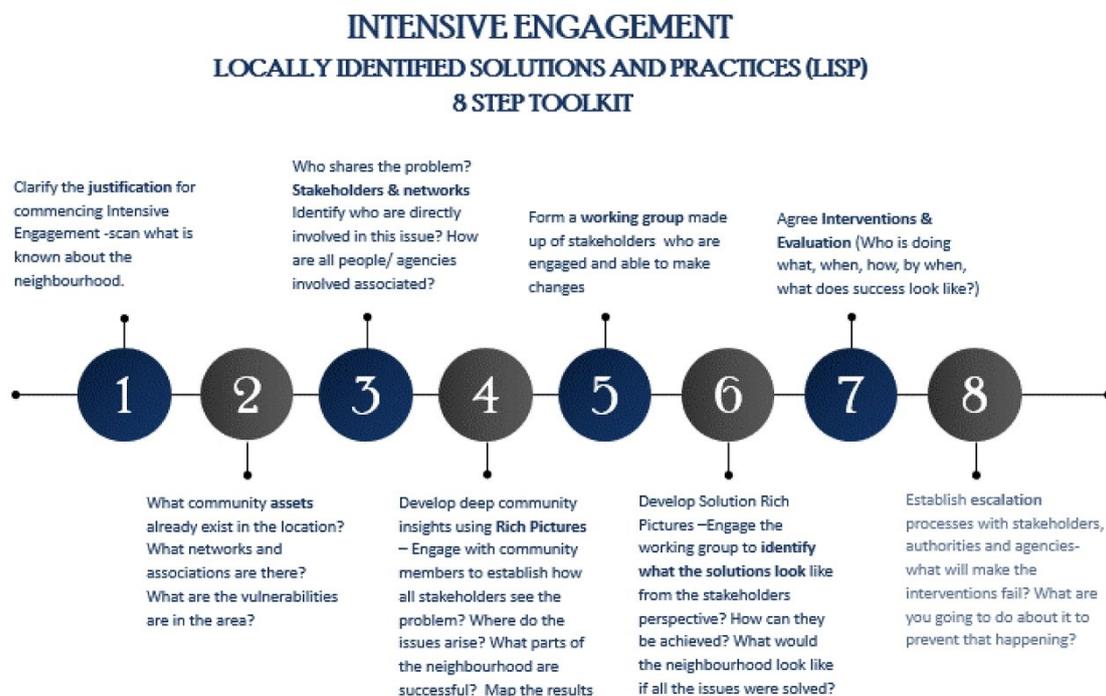


Figure 1 IE 8 Step process

This process isn’t a new community engagement technique – there are already too many of those. Instead, we carefully brought together the most effective techniques into a systematic and repeatable process.

Too many community engagement techniques lack preparation or follow-up, so we made sure all the processes of effective engagement are in place. These processes and mechanisms lie at the heart of our research, and underpin the framework.

The actual mechanisms that make community engagement work are essential in helping to deliver solutions that are specific to the uniqueness of every locality; what works in one neighbourhood for health outcomes, for example, will not work in another neighbourhood for crime outcomes.

Understanding and applying the underpinning mechanisms allows us to connect unique communities to unique combinations of outcomes. The eight-step approach is a 'coming together' of all the key mechanisms in a simple framework that can be applied anywhere.

Positive change

We have continued to undertake community engagement with hundreds of people, as well as forensic research to identify what works, where it works, and why it works, which has enabled us to further refine the eight-step approach.

In recent years the approach has been deployed to develop locally led crime prevention initiatives, which have initiated new channels of feedback from community members who felt they had no voice.

A scheme in the north of England revealed to local police some unseen local factors that were affecting recruitment rates. In the west of England they were able to work with the council and police to develop new methods by which young people could contribute to local plans.

Working with police and crime commissioners (PCCs) and police leadership teams, we have helped to design and shape a number of police and crime plans, and significant multi-agency operations.

Over the same period we have provided evidence and findings to national bodies and developed a network of associate partners from across policy, business and third-sector organisations who share the ambition to improve and embed effective community engagement and deliver positive change.

What works – and what can be improved

During this work a number of common themes have emerged from the continuing research and implementation – issues that seem to exist in nearly all the places that we have worked and that, if addressed, may lead to a rapid improvement in the planning and delivery of community engagement activities.

Joined up leadership: Some of the most effective plans have developed when local leaders meet, develop and then share a clear ambition and understanding the purpose of collaborating.

Successes seem to correlate with how much time leaders can spend working together, understanding and sharing perspectives, and working out joint solutions and new practices. Often the initial perspectives on issues can be quite different, which at times results in solutions that are sub-optimal.

The value of a consistent and sustainable approach: It should be no surprise that a shared approach to leading effective engagement is likely to be much more productive than a siloed or fragmented approach. It helps where community groups and leaders are able to understand what each other are doing, and why they are doing it – this can lead to complimentary activities that build better outcomes all round.

Things like consistent terminology and a clear framework to operate within are key. The ability to escalate local issues, seize opportunities and secure support are also essential, but in many locations such structures need to be re-designed.

Another critical success factor here is continuity in key roles at all levels. The churn of new faces representing different service providers is one of the most difficult challenges to

developing effective relationships, and building trust and understanding – and hence making progress.

Skills and relationships: We have to think differently in how we acquire community engagement skills and techniques. We cannot assume that these vital abilities will simply occur; we have seen a growing appreciation of the need to get back to basics on the ability to make time to listen, and make sense of local contexts.

We have seen examples where the joint training of local service providers with community members has laid fantastic foundations for a sustainable future. And there are some basic issues here; it never ceases to surprise us how often local service providers don't really know each other, and can only tackle problems in a siloed and adversarial fashion.

What's there already? Every community hosts many local 'assets' that can support local plans if connected, and a lot of our time can be spent identifying and encouraging communities to share skills and time together.

There's no shortage of potential collaborators beyond the geographical areas, within localities and nationally who are waiting to get involved – the third sector, business sector and many interest groups and foundations may offer genuine and significant support. It may take some negotiation by local leaders but, if harnessed, that collaboration can offer exciting opportunities to ensure that plans are sustained and can grow.

The value of insights: For too long we have relied on genuinely inadequate methods of community consultation. We have seen local plans and public monies based on extremely limited feedback from affected communities.

We also know that when we can properly listen and encourage community 'voice' it can help identify hidden issues and also hidden opportunities. How we energise this core component of genuine engagement is so important – and feeding back such rich pictures, experiences and views (however challenging) to local leaders is an essential function of every engagement plan. But it needs to be seen as a process, not an event.

The potential prize – effective 21st century community engagement

Throughout the last decade we have seen how much potential capacity exists within every community. Too often it remains untapped or uncoordinated; we know there are a multitude of local groups and networks with skills and capabilities that can offer much more active support to their neighbourhoods and neighbours elsewhere. Harnessing and focusing this capacity and capability can re-balance the see-saw of demand outstripping supply.

Technology now allows us to both map and access this multi-faceted offer, providing local community co-ordinators with immediate access to individual and combined resources. We can see the locations, streets and estates that benefit from strong local networks – and those that don't.

This in turn can fuel local engagement activity in a targeted fashion. Local skills and expertise of community members can be identified and harnessed in a co-ordinated plan involving problem-solving groups, community-led actions and individual activities.

The 'hyper-local' community contact – with an emphasis on face-to-face encounters – can help to build the confidence, relationships and trust upon which a richer conversation takes place as more voices can be heard. This will surface underlying issues that may be invisible to local service providers but are holding back progress on tackling long-term issues.

The very act of participating in a concerted and consistent manner has been shown to improve perceptions of legitimacy. An effective engagement plan opens up so many more channels to achieve better dialogue. This becomes particularly important in times of crisis or conflict or following a critical event.

It can ensure that local leaders can reach further into every community to listen to insights and perspectives that are essential in making better decisions and co-produce solutions with the community playing an active and constructive role.

Both leaders and communities can participate and take decisions with far greater confidence that they have a shared understanding of those issues, and of the implications of those decisions.

Time to act?

Community engagement plans now need to be better than ever; the challenge for leaders is to take an honest, open look at their current engagement techniques and ask whether they are as purposeful, ambitious, evidence based and integrated as they could be?

A quick review based on the summary of our findings in this article may be a helpful start, and diagnostic tools can quickly assess the ability of a plan to deliver against its purpose.

Leaders can now test, understand and develop their current and new plans so that communities can trust, invest in and benefit from getting involved.

When these foundations are in place, a focused and coherent approach to community engagement can lead to some very exciting outcomes; who knows what may be possible?

This is the first in a series of articles by Richard James and Dr Tim Curtis on 21st century community engagement, with future editorial co-authored with subject matter experts drawn from the policing, research, local authority and technology sectors.

About the Authors

Richard James, Managing Director of Intensive Engagement, spent 30 years working in policing; he is a highly experienced police leader, having led significant force-wide change programmes and commanded events of national significance. Richard supports the National College of Policing with its International Leadership course, and recently spent time working with eight EU policing agencies examining effective community policing practices and exploring the benefits that technology can offer. Richard has worked alongside a number of academic institutions to develop and implement evidence-based practice. He recently completed a Cambridge Masters focusing on the implementation of effective community engagement practices in complex locations.

Dr Tim Curtis, Executive Director of Intensive Engagement, is an internationally renowned author on social innovation and entrepreneurship, and an Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer at the University of Northampton. Tim developed the Locally Identified Solutions and Practices (LISP) approach to intensive community engagement out of 15 years' work in decision-making support and systems analysis in complex social contexts. His experience was then rapidly deployed with police and community support officers in Northants Police. Tim has been undertaking detailed research into the development and implementation of the LISP approach since 2012, for which he earned his PhD in June 2021.