

Future of London on-line roundtable - Eileen Conn

30 June 2022 launching the [Rethinking Community Engagement](https://www.futureoflondon.org.uk/launch-rethinking-community-engagement-june-2022) programme
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Thank you for inviting me to take part in this discussion of such a timely topic about rethinking community engagement. In just 4 minutes I can only refer to some key ideas but Sophie will be putting some links in the chat box for papers which give more details. I hope that they can be useful during the discussions that happen in the next few months.

Something is definitely not right. In 2019 just before the pandemic hit us, Grosvenor Estate, the largest private land owner in the world, conducted a public survey which revealed that only **2% of the public trust developers, and 7% of the public trust Local Planning Authorities**. The National Community Alliance have just published the results of their recent survey with similar results.

As a community activist this doesn't surprise me at all, because people everywhere are buffeted by redevelopment plans devised by outsiders and being asked for their views far too late. This misses out a crucial aspect of good planning which is to start with what is there and incorporate local **knowledge**. Without that, planning is like a 3 legged stool with only two legs.

So more and better of the existing engagement approach will alienate local people even further. Here are some ideas that may help with the rethinking.

- We need to understand there are **two very different social systems** interacting all the time in community engagement. The community is much more than 1000s of atomised individuals – we need to see it as a relational social system with its own organisational structures which is very distinct from the transactional social system of institutions, companies and registered charities. There is a link I hope in the chat box for my paper on 'Community Engagement in the Social Eco-System Dance' which explains the details of this.
- Once we do that we can see that **horizontal engagement** between peers is the community's natural engagement process compared with the **vertical engagement** of top down – bottom up between the two different social systems. The consultation processes need to incorporate the community's own horizontal engagement in the timetable, what I mean is the community's own discussions within itself through community events and newsletters. This is not something new for the vertical process to do, but to enable the community to do itself. It leads to much more informed responses in consultations.

I have a few further suggestions to make to help in this rethinking. These include:

- First, in urban areas not to call all development ‘**place-making**’. Sometimes it may be, but in many cases it is in effect **place-remaking** which is why local people are so alienated. Their place is already made and yet outsiders come along and say they want to make it a place. Until the process is changed so it starts with what is already there and engages them at that stage by finding out what is valued about that, any intervention is likely to be resisted and felt to be an unwelcome imposition where they are not being listened to.
- Second, Stop calling local activists ‘usual suspects’, which is a derogatory term for volunteers giving up their personal time to work together with local people to articulate local views. Stop viewing them as **gatekeepers** and realise they are potentially valuable **gateways** into the neighbourhood and local communications channels and help them to fulfil that promise.
- Third, introduce a mandatory requirement, for validation of planning applications, of a facts-on-the-ground report – that is, a **facts audit** - about the site, and agree it with the local stakeholders, before any impact assessments are made. There is a link to an article about this idea in the chat box.

These changes would help us rethink the current processes leading to redevelopment **from inside, instead of imposed from outside**, and begin to renew trust in developers and the planning system.

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Links mentioned in the talk:

Grosvenor Estate planning trust survey 2019 - <https://www.grosvenor.com/property/property-uk/community-success/building-trust>

National Community Alliance planning trust survey 2022 - <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-4VDP5I0G7j-CH27oYXFMOEvvTOg6BE/view>

Two systems model - <https://bit.ly/2yIoS7b>

Fact-based audits & inside-out development - <https://bit.ly/3Q3rov8>

Peckham vision - <http://www.peckhamvision.org/>
