

Improving housing stock through participatory design

What do we mean by participatory design?

A clear and accountable participatory design process involves local stakeholders in:

- developing a collective vision for change
- developing a design brief informed by local knowledge, needs and aspirations
- making decisions throughout the evolution of the design process
- signing off key stages of design

What do we mean by *local stakeholders*?

Too often, project teams think only of tenants and residents as community stakeholders. However, how the area links into the rest of the community, how it is supported and serviced is fundamental to its success. While not all stakeholders need to be involved in the same way and with the same level of participation in decision-making, an inclusive approach to community stakeholders can lead to better projects and can reduce conflict and opposition to planning proposals.

Stakeholders include:

- Those who currently live on site (if it is a new development, involve the type of person you hope to cater for, any RSL likely to be involved, local authority officers who may refer tenants to the site, estate agents who are likely to sell/let the properties – they all know what type of property is lacking in the area).
- Those who live near the site – they will be affected and have the right to be involved. They can also offer valuable insight on the area.
- Those who own, manage and maintain the site and/or will do so in the future
- Local schools – explore both how they will serve and how they will be affected by the new development.
- Local community and voluntary organisations – they are a valuable ally as they are aware of local issues and generally have good links with local people
- Local businesses – they will have an interest in new customers and links to the new site.
- Local service and amenities providers – don't forget local doctors surgeries, which will be greatly affected by changes to population.
- Neighbourhood police, emergency services, refuse collection companies etc.

How can stakeholder participation improve design quality?

- Participatory visioning and brief development will lead to projects that better meet the needs and aspirations of local people.
- Participatory design processes bring together stakeholders with both similar and conflicting interests to explore options, identify shared objectives and agree a way forward. If this relationship and approach is in place before the design process starts, it makes for much easier and more focused work for the design team.
- A vision and brief that harnesses local knowledge and enthusiasm gives the design team valuable input that will lead to better informed design
- Local people often have ideas that might not occur to the design team. Local knowledge and design expertise are complimentary and should inform and support each other.
- When local people are involved in and informing the evolution of a design, they gain a better understanding and appreciation for the final scheme. They understand how decisions are taken, why some design ideas are put aside and others pursued. They become an asset rather than an obstacle to the design process and share responsibility for the scheme's success and compromises.

Lessons from the front line

1. Don't underestimate the value of investing in participatory design

- Think of your stakeholders as a resource, not an obstacle. Involving local people throughout the evolution of the design process leads to better informed decisions and more creative design solutions. Local people really understand how their area ticks and their collective expertise is invaluable.
- A relationship with stakeholders grounded in shared opportunity and collaboration rather than distrust and conflict means fewer objections or costly delays in moving projects forward.
- Schemes that are appreciated and welcomed lead to places that are better used, maintained and enjoyed. If the aim really is to improve an area, the involvement of local people can ensure that the scheme fits the place and becomes part of the community. All of this will lead to much better quality of life both for the residents of the development and for those around them.
- Successful schemes have a knock-on effect to the area, attracting social and economic activity and increasing the value of the development.

2. Don't underestimate the importance of planning for participation

- Build relationships within the community before your start.
- Plan a process which allows for different levels and methodologies for stakeholder participation throughout the duration of the project. Not everyone can or will attend a meeting or fill out a survey.
- Make sure participation offers some benefit (a sense of opportunity and influence, capacity building, fun, incentives) to those who take part.
- Create a clear role for a stakeholder working group that supports and complements broader participation and engagement.
- Plan and agree a clear set of roles and responsibilities to support the process.
- Plan and agree clear stages to be signed off by the project team and stakeholders.
- Plan for capacity building for both the project team and the stakeholder working group. Where possible, ensure that some joint learning and development sessions are attended by both groups.

3. Get to know the people, the site and the local context

Take the time to map and get to know:

- the population in the area
- those involved in managing, maintaining and servicing the area
- the services and amenities in the area
- local businesses
- local community and voluntary groups / organisations
- transport links
- what currently works well and what doesn't, both on site and in the surrounding area

You can get local schools, organisations and community groups to play a substantial role in this if they feel they will play a role in decision-making.

4. Build capacity and skills within the staff team

- Raise awareness and build skills around participation and engagement
- Raise awareness around the design and procurement process. Many people on the project team may not have a background in design or construction.
- Ensure that those working on the project know the area and the related issues and opportunities
- Take the team to visit a number of inspiring sites and talk to the people who live there and manage the site about the site's successes and shortcomings.

5. Build capacity and skills among stakeholders

- Raise awareness around the opportunities and challenges related to the project. Be honest about the challenges and limitations!
- Raise awareness, knowledge and skills around the design and procurement process.
- Create opportunities for people to gain new confidence and skills that are transferable (eg. learning how to work a video camera or manage social media campaigns for the mapping process etc). Local community groups and organisations may be able to help create these opportunities through their programmes.
- Take the stakeholder project group to visit a number of inspiring sites and talk to the people who live there and manage the site about the site's successes and shortcomings.

6. Use the process to bring people together

- Bring together stakeholders who do not usually meet in a neutral, welcoming and supportive environment. This may benefit from involving independent enablers.
- Create opportunities for the project team and stakeholders to learn and work together.
- Work with local community organisations and schools to make participatory sessions fun and relevant. For example, mapping can be carried out through walks, treasure hunts, interviews etc. and can support / be supported by inter-generational oral history projects at the local community centre or museum, school citizenship projects, art projects etc. Small pots of funding to support such projects can lead to greater involvement from local people and can cost considerably less than traditional methods.
- Make sure your design team works with both the project team and community stakeholders, and that there are numerous opportunities for discussion and shared decision-making.

7. Get the most from your design team

- Involve stakeholders in selecting the design team. It is important that the design team is willing and able to work with a range of stakeholders, will respect their contributions, and will use their input to enhance design quality.
- Make sure your design team works with both staff and community stakeholders, but don't expect them to get the stakeholders involved. Ensure that local people are already engaged and active before the design team starts work.
- Give your design team a clear vision and comprehensive design brief that draws on local networks and knowledge. The clearer and more comprehensive the brief, the better chances there are of getting a well-designed scheme.
- Create and agree clear opportunities to discuss design options and agree clear stages in the process to sign off decisions with stakeholders.

For more information on how to bring participatory design to your scheme, visit

www.theglasshouse.org.uk