

HASTINGS BIG CONVERSATION

Event summary - 19th July 2024

Introduction

The purpose of the Hastings Big Conversation workshop was to bring community leaders together to develop principles for community engagement that could guide the Long-Term Plan. Within that was a unique opportunity (and responsibility) to set the tone for a potential 10-year collaboration between those participating.

People told us in the survey and interviews we conducted in the lead up to the workshop that the energy had to be positive and fresh and that we needed to strike the right balance between learning painful lessons from the past and imagining new possibilities for Hastings.

Here we highlight three key methods we used to design the workshop in a way that helped facilitated this purpose:

- **Interactive facilitation:** The main protagonists in the workshop were the 60+ participants, and we wanted to make sure they had many opportunities to connect with one another, share their thinking and build on each other's ideas. Within the first 15 minutes, people were invited to talk in pairs, which was followed by an interactive activity across the room and two sessions in small groups. We only used plenary sessions to share instructions and to welcome and close the workshop.
- **Using all the data:** Several survey respondents had pointed out how all too often, consultations happen in a way that leaves people with no idea what was done with the information they provided. We used the data people had shared with us via the survey and interviews in two ways: first, by displaying all the organisations and projects people had uplifted across the room for an interactive activity, and second, for a breakout group activity on principles for community engagement. For the latter activity, we provided each table with an envelope that contained printed copies of key points and quotes from the data clustered loosely into themes, which gave participants some grounding in their colleague's thinking and ensured they were building on and adding to what had already been said.

Building broad consensus: We knew we wouldn't be able to arrive at a definitive list of principles with the size of the group and limited time we had. What we prioritised instead was giving everyone an opportunity to submit something perhaps a little rough around the edges from their breakout group activity, which the facilitators then distilled into a draft set of principles that reflected the work across the whole room. It was important to us to create something that people could recognise as their own. Even if the principles need some refinement further down the line, people know they were built out of a collective process.

Bright Spots

Over 45 community projects, events and networks were chosen as good examples of inclusive and consultative activities in Hastings and St Leonards. The following were the most popular 10, with most people indicating that these projects could provide a lot of good learning.

1. Community visual arts and spoken word projects (e.g. Jack in the Green)
2. Connected Futures
3. Hastings Commons
4. Seaview Project
5. Hastings Voluntary Action
6. Making It Happen
7. Hastings Community Networks
8. Hastings Half Marathon
9. Hastings Sustainable Transport Forum
10. Children's Centres

Summary of the 'Good Ingredients'

The purpose of exploring what has worked, what people value, and what 'good' local consultation looks like is to identify the 'good ingredients' of effective community engagement in Hastings and St Leonards.

Eight groups engaged with this activity, coming up with feedback together before presenting back to the room.

Residents were seen as having the primary voice, but there was also a consensus on the need to consult tourists and transient visitors. Empowering local neighbourhoods to organise and represent themselves, ensuring representation across all demographics, and adopting inclusive governance models like those in India and the Philippines were strongly advocated.

Effective projects were identified as those that are genuinely bottom-up, grassroots initiatives that actively reach out to the community. Accessibility emerged as a crucial factor, ensuring that projects reach the communities most in need. There was a strong call for transparency in funding, with clear communication on how money is spent and the tangible differences it makes.

The term "consulting" was seen as needing a refresh, with a push towards more creative and engaging methods of community consultation. Local commissioning over national consultants, involving local volunteers, and a joined-up multi-agency approach were seen as essential. Schools and community forums were highlighted as integral parts of the process, with a focus on accessibility to ensure broad participation.

Challenges such as a loss of local trust, frustration with surveys, and squandered money on projects were noted. The importance of local engagement and ownership was highlighted through examples like 'The Bridge' which, despite being a great idea, failed due to a lack of

local sense of ownership. Continuous engagement with local schools, students, and volunteers was recommended, alongside conducting meetings in accessible, non-threatening environments.

Inclusive practices should avoid stigmatising the most deprived, ensuring equal access for all, including marginalised groups. Respecting diverse opinions, maintaining long-term consistency in staff relations, and valuing local input were deemed critical. Emphasis was placed on listening to quiet voices and ensuring every voice is included, particularly those from hard-to-reach or small organisations.

Good community engagement was described as being accessible, with clear, jargon-free communication. Decision-making should involve young people, with training and support for peer researchers. Engagement should be local, diverse, and demystified to encourage broad participation. The consultation underscored the importance of adopting grassroots approaches, respecting local input, and ensuring transparent and sustainable funding to foster a more engaged and empowered Hastings community.

Who has the right to be engaged?

- The consensus is that residents should have the primary voice in community matters.
- Tourists and transient visitors should also be consulted to some extent.
- There is strong support for empowering local neighbourhoods to organise and have a voice.
- Every demographic group including children, adults and the elderly should be represented.
- Models such as neighbourhood parliaments in India and Barangay in the Philippines were suggested as examples of effective local governance.
- The use of sociocracy was recommended as an inclusive method for town board governance, community assemblies and neighbourhood organising.

Effective projects:

- Projects should be grassroots, genuinely bottom-up and actively reach out to the community.
- Accessibility is crucial, ensuring that projects reach the communities that need them the most.
- Funding should be transparent with a clear understanding of how it has been spent and what differences have been made.

Community consultation:

- There is a call to move away from the term "consulting" towards more creative and engaging methods.
- Local commissioning should be prioritised over hiring UK-wide consultants.
- Involving local volunteers and adopting a joined-up multi-agency approach is essential.
- Schools and community forums should be integral parts of the consultation process.

- Accessibility considerations are vital to ensure broad participation.

Challenges and recommendations:

- There is a noted loss of trust locally with people fed up with surveys and frustrated by squandered money and lost opportunities.
- Examples like "The Bridge" show that great ideas can fail without proper local engagement and a sense of ownership.
- Continuous engagement with local schools, students and volunteers is necessary.
- Meetings and outreach should occur in accessible, non-threatening environments, especially in hard-to-reach areas.

Inclusive practices:

- Engagement efforts should not stigmatise the most deprived and should ensure equal access for all including marginalised groups.
- Respecting diverse opinions, ensuring long-term consistency in staff relations and valuing local input are critical.
- Listening to quiet voices and ensuring every voice is included, especially those from hard-to-reach or small organisations, is essential.

Good practices identified:

- Children's centres are recognised as a valuable resource.
- Projects like the Snowflake project demonstrate wide engagement through community networks.
- Long-term sustainable funding is necessary to ensure reliability and avoid confusion from short-lived initiatives.
- Creating inclusive, easy-to-access and welcoming environments can enhance participation.
- Cross-cultural events like "Jack in the Green" can serve as platforms for community interaction and engagement.

Ingredients for good community engagement:

- Accessibility and clear communication without jargon are crucial.
- Decisions should involve young people with training and support for peer researchers.
- Engagement should be local, diverse and demystified to encourage broad participation.

Emerging Principles

We asked the groups to consider how to translate these traits and characteristics of effective engagement into a set of principles that could underpin a future way of working.

Over the Long Term Plan duration, The Hastings Board should first adopt, and then actively demonstrate, several clear principles to guide its community engagement and governance

efforts. These principles should be rooted in inclusive, creative, and community-led approaches that ensure every voice is heard and respected. Participatory budgeting should be reformed to feel less like a board meeting and more like a genuine consultation with real people who have real drive and passion. This process should retire outdated methods and replace them with fair consultations that genuinely reflect the diverse population of Hastings, particularly those with lived experiences of poverty, education and homelessness.

A representative community assembly is crucial for Hastings, encompassing a diverse cross-section of the town's population by ethnicity, income, views and education. This assembly should be a permanent fixture to keep the town board accountable, encouraging creative and outside-the-box thinking rather than relying on traditional forms and processes. Local peer engagement should be led by community members themselves, ensuring that initiatives are grounded in the lived experiences of residents.

Communication and feedback should be ongoing, with the town board maintaining a regular presence in the community, such as a weekly or monthly stall in the town hall. Quick wins are essential to maintain momentum and community trust, focusing on co-production underpinned by communities that reach diverse interests and geographical areas in Hastings. The adoption of a form of solidarity framework might prevent divisions among under-represented groups and ensure inclusivity across all political perspectives and ways of thinking.

Promoting civic pride is vital for Hastings' future, including embracing temporary street art and other community projects that allow all interest and geographic communities to recognise themselves and engage actively. Reducing inequalities and improving life chances for all residents should be a top priority, fostering a future built on consensus, pride and shared direction. Better utilisation of town and community resources kept local, along with increased trust in processes and power holders, will address the broader agenda recognised by all, even if specific aspects may not be universally favoured.

Finally, effective communication using local talent, along with funding clinics and consultation advice, will support the ongoing review and improvement of consultation practices. Admission of projects should be transparent and based on comprehensive feedback from the community.

Headline Principles

From these discussions, several core headline principles emerged, that were accepted by a broad consensus in the room:

1. Community engagement and inclusion

- Engage with schools early to incorporate young voices.
- Prioritise inclusion and access-first approaches.
- Listen to quiet voices and ensure all communities are represented.

2. No ticking boxes

- Focus on effective consultation with clarity of purpose at every stage.
- Ensure representative and quality engagement over quantity.
- Create spaces for community challenges and feedback.

3. Trust and communication

- Build and maintain trust through transparent communication of processes and outcomes.
- Ensure all initiatives are collaborative and co-designed with the community.

4. Empowerment and participation

- Encourage volunteering and true co-production in all projects.
- Take time to make space for meaningful community participation.

5. Awareness and allocation of resources

- Build on existing resources and draw on local expertise.
- Avoid unnecessary competition for funds and focus on strategic collaboration.

6. Local focus

- Prioritise local employment and commissioning.
- Be clear on local spend to enhance economic growth within Hastings.

7. Celebration and solidarity

- Celebrate diversity and civic pride.
- Highlight and leverage local assets and strengths to build solidarity.

Timeline and Action Planning

This is a long-term plan over 10 years that requires thinking differently about bringing people on a journey than most of the projects we've been involved in. For example, the way we might involve people in year one might be really different from how they might engage in year nine. The people might change. The town will have changed. This isn't just about the next six months.

The eight groups in the room considered a timeline over the next 10 years and discussed the questions:

1. Who will be involved?

2. What will they be doing?
3. What resource will be required for that year?

Year One:

- Set up a community events CIC
 - Shared assets for festivals: toilets, road markings, waste access, public liability insurance, space
 - Maximise the impact of festivals by cutting infrastructure costs
- Establish a community assembly
 - A representative assembly of all of Hastings by ethnicity, income, views, and education
 - Local peer engagement led by residents
- Transparency review of governance and objectives (resource required: locally sourced capacity)
- Lay foundations with existing organisations and networks
 - Participatory budgeting, increase awareness, shared pragmatic approach, vision + projects
- Clarity on the plan and content with SMART objectives
- Outreach to ensure representation, listen to feedback, and act on it
- Adopt a cultural strategy with contributions from the cultural sector, council, and artists
- Develop a community engagement plan and funding framework consultation
- Annual review of decision-making (resources: time, methods, engagement, marketing)
- Select and review consultation process (resources: people, money, connections in local government)
- Create a town team to grow (resources: community asset, forward planning)

Year Two:

- Review governance and objectives
- Review for inclusivity backup
- Refresh the board to represents the community
- Creative consultation (resources: artist to devise/lead consultation)
- Community feedback on proposed projects
- Genuine engagement and community forum (resources: self-regulation, accessibility)
- Review and consult on the consultation process
- Establish town staff front

Year Three:

- Maintain momentum in individual collaborative projects and funding
- Involve the whole community, including professionals and local people
- Invest in cultural buildings
- Report on outcomes and impacts
- Engage constituents who have not yet benefited from any projects

Year Four:

- Evaluate local resources and utilisation
- Review plan for sustainability

Year Five:

- Link young people to community efforts with older people
- Mid-programme evaluation and adjustments for following years
- Establish a centre for youth arts at St. Marys
- Town board peer reviews
- Focus on financial growth and making community buildings fit for the future

Year Six:

- Identify and engage with existing community groups and networks, reviewing membership and levels of activity engagement

Years Seven to Ten:

- Continue collaborative projects with a focus on long-term asset growth
- End of programme evaluation and planning for sustainability
- Ensure no one in the community is left homeless
- Regular updates and strategic evaluations to ensure sustainability and growth

Summary Data from Pre-session Survey and Interviews

This has been aggregated and anonymised in the case of any identifying information.

Insights around the inclusion and exclusion of people in community engagement work

- Larger organisations dominating the conversation
- Celebrate voluntary organisations as significant local employers
- How will people who live on the border of the town where most poverty exists be included in this?
- “Those in the most deprived wards who wouldn’t dream of coming to an event like this [are typically excluded]. You need to be in community centres like Broomgrove.”
- Sustain a team of people who are devoted to community engagement for the long term
- Young people - if you’re engaging with young people, you need staff they can relate to
- “Communication with younger people via social media is often good for responses but seems less developed for more in depth or sustained partnership.”
- Jargon is an issue
- “Current structures favour the highly articulate and connected.”
- Lack of information
- Lack of accessible spaces

- Please don't rely on electronic forms or engaging via social media as it discriminates against so many people (esp. older people)
- Office hours aren't accessible to everyone

People most often excluded:

- People of colour
- Disabled people
- Working people
- Carers
- People who are isolated
- Poor people
- People who don't speak English well
- Those perceived to be too radical/progressive
- People not involved in the voluntary sector
- Tiny organisations

"If you can explain how to reach the 'hard to reach people' we would all love to know."

What should be key criteria for this investment?

- The investment has to positively impact people's lives
- "Don't allow it to become too scattergun. Make this injection of investment trigger a direction of travel."
- It has to add social and economic value
- Circular economy - it can grow itself
- We have to be able to sustain the project (e.g. maintenance) over time
- Thinking about the whole system
- Embed the investment in local infrastructure to ensure long-term sustainability
- Involvement from statutory, voluntary and private sectors
- Invest in local community organisations to deliver some of the work
- Not funding things that used to be funded through different channels (e.g. central / local gov) - "patch up"
- Focus on quick wins, something tangible and visible people can recognise

Hastings Board investment principles

- Prioritise funding interventions delivered by local Hastings organisations
- Encourage all LTP funded projects to prioritise, where possible, procuring and sourcing supplies and services from other Hastings based companies
- Encourage all LTP funded projects to offer apprenticeships and work experience placements to support the delivery of the interventions
- Encourage all LTP funded project to minimise their impact on the environment and help contribute to achieving net zero carbon emissions

- Share learning and best practice amongst the LTP funded projects
- Ensure that over the lifetime of the Long-Term Funding interventions, the Borough's diverse communities, including children and young people, and localities benefit from the investment
- Ensure the LTP investment adds value to existing public, private or community investment in the Borough

What are some of the elephants in the room / unspoken things when we talk about community engagement?

- Who really is the community?
 - “The word community is hard to define so everyone claims it while others might judge them to be self-serving or ineffective.”
 - There are lots of disparate communities who want different things and don't necessarily want to be associated with each other
- Who benefits financially?
- Who are the decision makers?
 - “People feel decisions are made for them, someone else decides what they need.”
- Fuzzy governance
- What are the priorities of the new council?
- How will the 10-year vision statement differ from that of the Town Deal that was done a few years ago?
- This isn't a lot of money (£2m per year) - it will only work if other bodies commit investments alongside us (e.g. NHS)
- Lack of available financial resources and general poverty in the town
- Assumption that if you have political power you must be right
- Active involvement is limited to a few people
 - “There is huge expertise in the community, it needs to be recognised and valued when all too often it is dismissed.”
- The community needs to take some responsibility and ownership and not expect local authorities and police to address the most pressing issues
- Community ownership is a meaningless phrase if not openly practised
 - “The majority of people simply don't have the time. Those who do tend to have vested interests... when we talk about ‘ownership’, what is it that we think the community actually owns?”
- Mistrust
 - “Many local people do not trust the council, councillors and council officers. They don't understand how the council works, how it is funded and what its responsibilities are. They blame HBC for anything and everything that is perceived to be wrong with the town and everything that goes wrong in it.”
- Lack of financial support for organisations
- The lack of affordable community spaces for small and unfunded organisations

- The sheer number of empty shop fronts
- Political control and requirements from national office prevents local council working across parties

What are pain points around community engagement that we should avoid?

- Asking for input without feedback or showing results leads to disillusionment and is seen as a tick box exercise
- No follow-through information on how the public money was spent or how decisions were made
 - “It has to be not just collating views but letting people know what’s been found and what difference it’s made. There has to be a narrative around their engagement.”
- Consultation fatigue due to numerous ongoing processes - create a local engagement calendar so charities can coordinate (e.g. Health Watch engagement currently happening)
- Last-minute consultations to meet deadlines
- Avoid unnecessary external / expensive / time-consuming consultations
 - “Endless consultation without leadership or an idea of direction of travel results in paralysis. We should state we need to decarbonise and make our town beautiful, culturally vibrant and inclusive and complete one project after another as fast as we can with that in mind.”
- Seeking short-term external gains (e.g. short-lived university presence leading to disappointment)
- Same old faces
- Talking shop rather than getting on with things
- Procrastination
- Political lobbying by councillors skewing funding priorities
- Overpromising
- People are aware of the financial scarcity in the system, which dampens their belief that their visions can be realised
- Lack of community involvement in the delivery
 - “The investment has simply brought people to Hastings who need navigation on who to talk to, and sometimes you think, why not commission local organisations who could deliver that work? It also leaves behind a lot of loose ends.”
- Duplication
- Lack of attention to creating new leadership from poorer communities
- Siloed working
 - “Too many organisations working in silos focusing on their own short-term agendas rather than the bigger picture. A lot of the issues are interlinked and need a multi-agency and multi-disciplinary approach.”
- External consultants and advisors who don’t know Hastings

- “What we need to avoid is asking outside consultants to come up with schemes and ideas without a proper brief derived from the needs of the community.”
- Competition between organisations, some hogging all the grants

What are some good practices around community engagement?

- Thinking differently
- Break from the past
- Setting the right energy
 - This is the jumping off point for all the things to come
 - Learning from past mistakes (e.g. the Getting Started report reviews 20 years of community engagement for Big Local)
- Build on what’s already there
 - “This isn’t a revolution but a slow change.”
 - There might be other local solutions to ideas people bring, plug those in
- External facilitation helps to mitigate mistrust
- Setting honest and realistic expectations
 - “It sounds like a lot of money but we have to be realistic and not over promise. I’d rather we target it at well-thought-through, visible projects that people can recognise.”
- Community-led consultation, e.g. by training community representatives to lead consultations, increases trust and effectiveness
 - “It’s not about community engagement but community development, you build capacity in the community to have their voice. People need to be able to shape significant decisions, not just small scale ones.”
- Consortium approach
- Genuine collaboration with communities and showing how they can have impact (this isn’t a done deal)
 - “Setting the right expectations. It can be alienating to have everything already laid out; on the other hand, decisions can feel overwhelming without clear leadership and people’s ideas just go into a vacuum. Try to facilitate the right questions and be open to where the conversation goes.”
- Community-led decision-making
 - “We need to frame this as a supportive evolution that is iterative and community-led, rather than a revolution.”
- Empowering community members with skills to hold the process accountable
- Tailored engagement with different communities (e.g. central areas vs Hollington, carers being able to attend meetings)
 - “We need to go to people rather than expect them to come to us.”
- Maintaining a consistent level of engagement over a longer period of time, otherwise it’s just a consultation
 - “Face to face engagement [is key]. Go where groups of people are, go to less formal places, e.g. food banks, food drops, community meals. You need the right

people (not someone highly qualified but someone with an experience of life) who can listen. In the process give someone a job.”

- Being clear what communities will have a say in beyond year 1 of the process
- Involving young people is essential as they are future stakeholders
- Clear communication, accessible, unbureaucratic language