
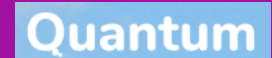


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# The cost of not engaging

Exploring the costs associated with local authorities not engaging the public in a participatory way

Delivered for Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme by:

involveFORUM  
FOR THE  
FUTUREIpsosQuantum



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# Executive summary

**This report explores the costs that can arise when public participation does not happen. We draw upon five illustrative case studies, based on interviews with local authorities, to identify the points, during and after the engagement process, where costs arose, and explore how participatory engagement may have helped mitigate these costs.**

Public participation is key to local authorities' decision-making processes, forming a vital part of how strategies, plans, and programmes of work are developed and executed. Participation can take many different forms, but for simplicity this report refers to non-participatory engagement (which aims to inform or consult with the public) and participatory engagement (which engages the public more deeply in decision-making).

**When should different methods be used?** Both participatory and non-participatory methods of engagement provide value to local authorities. Non-participatory engagement can be most appropriate when decisions have low stakes, affect a small and clearly defined group for a limited period, are tightly constrained by statutory safety or technical requirements, or when informing is the only option as the decision must be taken at a faster pace. On the other hand, participatory engagement is better suited to complex or contested issues; decisions that materially impact access to essential services; choices that rely on public trust, support and uptake; and to early stages in the policy cycle when there is genuine potential to shape priorities and options. Participatory engagement can also be more effective at engaging groups who can be harder to reach via non-participatory engagement. The two approaches can be used in tandem, too, enabling local authorities and their stakeholders to gather wide and deep public insights.

**What about the cost?** Both approaches carry inherent costs. However, the case studies indicate that additional and unplanned costs can arise when engagement is largely one-way i.e. when it is non-participatory. These costs occur at different stages of the project development cycle when the public feels unheard, unable to influence, or unclear about the rationale for change.

The unexpected costs can be both financial and non-financial, ranging from officer time diverted to handling complaints and FOI responses, the direct costs of legal defence, the cost of redesigning or reversing a decision, a programme not working as planned due to lack of public uptake, and reputational damage. These can all lead to reduced public trust in local authority decision-making and have knock-on impacts for future initiatives. This report suggests that, while participatory engagement can be more expensive upfront, participatory methods can help build shared understanding, surface concerns of acceptability related to controversial issues, and often includes under-heard voices which can increase legitimacy. These benefits can help to avoid many of the unexpected or additional costs that can be accrued through only engaging the public in a non-participatory way.

# Executive summary

Costs identified  
in case studies:



£4k - £300k

Unquantified costs  
identified in case  
studies:



Reputational  
damage



Lost trust



Knock-on impacts  
on other services



Cost of non-  
delivery



Residents  
feel unheard

The key conclusions are that...

Citizen engagement is a core feature of local government decision-making, and bringing public voices into policy and programme design is vital.

Participatory methods give communities meaningful influence, but their upfront costs are often seen as a barrier in resource-constrained local authorities.

Case studies suggest that when meaningful engagement does not happen, local authorities can incur large, unplanned costs that can exceed the cost of participatory approaches (for example, in one local authority these costs exceeded £300,000, more than most participatory engagement processes would cost). This is particularly the case when decisions affect services or everyday life, and when influence is possible but not offered.

Participatory engagement can help avoid these additional costs, particularly where issues are complex, sensitive, or trust-dependent.

# 1. Introduction

This report explores some of the costs that arise when public participation does not inform public decision-making. It draws upon case studies, based on interviews with local authorities, to identify the points, during and after the engagement process, where costs arose and suggest approaches that could avoid this in future.

Public engagement is a core element of how local government functions and supports local democracy. This can take many different forms and purposes (see the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)'s [Spectrum of Public Engagement](#)). Engagement forms a key part of local authorities' decision-making and programme-design processes.

This report focuses on two broad approaches for engaging the public: non-participatory and participatory engagement. These are umbrella terms, covering many different approaches. On the public engagement spectrum referred to above, non-participatory engagement can be mapped as 'informing' and 'consulting', and participatory engagement as 'involving', 'collaborating', and 'empowering'. The terms are used as useful summaries for these different levels of participation.

Both participatory and non-participatory engagement cost money to implement, ranging from the cost of carrying out the engagement, through to the defence of decisions that have been made. However, there is limited evidence on the costs that arise when engagement does not happen or only meets statutory requirements.

This report suggests that participatory engagement can mitigate additional costs local authorities may face due to design that does not meet public needs, or backlash to a decision. It has been informed by five illustrative case studies, based on five interviews with local government officials, which indicate where additional costs were incurred, and how participatory engagement may help to avoid these.

## Key definitions

### Non-participatory engagement

This refers to engagement where communities comment on proposals, not shape them. Common methods range from online consultations and surveys, to public forums. These are open to all but can often have low responses or be overly influenced by people with specific opinions. Statutory engagement refers to consultation that local authorities have a legal requirement to undertake in the decision-making process. Statutory engagement is often (but not always) non-participatory. Local authorities have processes to meet these requirements, such as planning consultation portals.

### Participatory engagement

Participatory engagement refers to active involvement of residents and communities in democratic processes that enable them to influence, shape, or contribute to decisions, policies, and services that affect their lives. It goes beyond legal requirements and includes a wide range of activities, including dialogue and deliberative methods e.g. citizens' assemblies. In these processes, public views are meaningfully considered and can influence outcomes. Participants are often selected by recruiting a demographically representative sample of the population.

# When should we use different methods of engaging?

Both participatory and non-participatory methods are essential to effective governance, programme-design, and decision-making in local authorities. It can be challenging, however, to know when these different methods should be used. The IAP2 Spectrum provides a useful guide, linking different levels of participatory engagement to a clear promise about the degree of public influence on a decision. This framework and the research conducted to inform this report suggest that the core task is matching the method of engagement to the significance of the decision, the real scope for influence, and the level of risk if the process is perceived as not truly hearing public views.

**Non-participatory engagement** can work best in the following cases:

- When a decision is low-stakes and impacts a small group of people for a limited and clearly defined amount of time.
- When legal, safety, or technical constraints leave little genuine room for change – for example, maintenance works.
- When timelines are urgent. For example, using a model of decision-making called “Decide, Announce, Defend” during emergency situations to ensure responses are timely and informed by expertise. This is more a reason to only inform than to consult.
- When decisions are incremental and reversible, and do not rely on high public confidence or behaviour change.

**Participatory engagement** can work best in the following contexts:

- When issues are complex, contested, or value-laden, and a range of factors influence both the current situation and its various alternatives.
- When a decision or policy will materially affect people’s access to or the quality of essential services, such as changing a public transport route that serves isolated communities.
- When success of a policy or programme requires public support and buy-in but is complex, often misunderstood, or the participation of some groups have been overlooked in the past.
- Early in the policy cycle, when problems and priorities are still being defined and there is genuine scope for the public to impact the direction, priorities, and focus of policies.

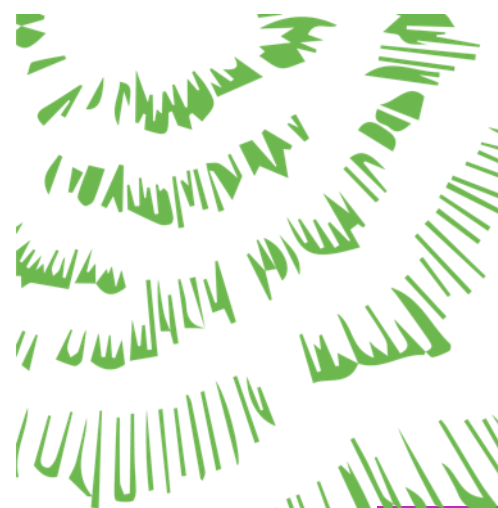
The two approaches can also be used in tandem to combine breadth and depth. For example, starting a decision-making process with a survey or consultation to map the range of views, then convening a participatory process to work through trade-offs and shape options.

## 2. Overall findings

The research has identified there are costs associated with both statutory and participatory engagement, but that the latter can help decision-makers avoid additional and unplanned costs.

These costs can range significantly in type and scale depending on the local context and type of decision.

This report forms part of the [Net Zero Living Programme](#) funded by Innovate UK, which has supported over 50 local authorities to develop innovative, place-based approaches to net zero. Involve and partners (Ipsos, Quantum, and Forum for the Future) have provided practical delivery and support on citizen engagement.



# How and where costs can be incurred

Both non-participatory and participatory engagement have inherent costs. Statutory engagement budgets may be incorporated into local authority budgeting decisions, whereas the costs of bespoke participatory engagement are more likely to be additional.



The cost of running non-participatory engagement (e.g. consultations) varies considerably depending on the type of decision and size of authority. Costs can be challenging to quantify, as engagement for this is rarely externally contracted and uses internal budgets. Local Plan consultations can range from £25-30k for smaller district local planning authorities to over £100k for large unitary authorities.



The general cost of participatory engagement in local authorities can vary depending on the size and type of engagement, but can range from £15k to £300k, or more if the engagement is long-standing or with a larger number of participants.

Interviews demonstrated that when engagement is non-participatory or does not happen, additional and unexpected costs can arise. These costs may come from public backlash to decisions, or failure to deliver programmes effectively if they have not been informed by public insights. These costs are not only financial: trust, reputational damage, and knock-on impacts on future initiatives also play a role.

## Additional costs identified in case studies:



£4k - £300k

## Unquantified costs identified in case studies:



Reputational damage



Lost trust



Knock-on impacts on other services



Cost of non-delivery



Residents feel unheard

This report shows that participatory engagement can play a significant role in reducing or mitigating these costs (see also the [“Trust, public engagement and UK Parliament”](#) briefing report). Ultimately, incorporating participatory engagement into decision-making and programme design can create greater efficiencies through proactively ensuring services and decisions align with local needs and preference. This approach also enhances the transparency of decision-making processes, helping to develop trust in institutions and empowering residents.

# The cost of not engaging

In case studies, additional costs came at different stages of the decision-making process or of service delivery. Our case studies identified commonalities in what concerns could cause additional costs (largely related to public feeling or knowledge of a programme or decision), and the form these additional costs could take.

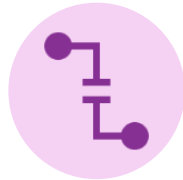
## If the public...

## This can trigger additional costs through...

*These are the causes of additional costs*



Think that a decision does not reflect their views because there was not enough engagement, or the engagement conducted was not accessible to them



Do not agree on a decision made, despite adequate statutory engagement



Find programmes or infrastructure will not benefit those they intend to support

*These are the forms that additional costs can take*



Additional officer time needed, for example to re-design programmes, defend decisions that have been made, or cope with disruption



Direct costs, such as legal fees, repair, or maintenance



Money spent on delivery or consultation that cannot be recouped.



Loss or reduced trust in local authority and its decision making, causing reputational damage



Legal or judicial review

# 3. Stages of decision-making

Engagement plays a key role in informing local authority decisions and therefore needs a place in the decision-making process. Local authorities have a legal public duty to consult on decisions. This report explores examples of where local authorities have used non-participatory engagement that resulted in unexpected costs (both monetary and reputational), which may have been mitigated if a participatory approach had been conducted in addition to statutory consultation.

To explore where unexpected and additional costs may arise, this section sets out the steps that local authorities take to make decisions and develop projects, focusing on the points where engagement is conducted. The decision-making/project development steps are inputs, activities, outcomes and outputs.

These steps provide a comparative structure for the different approaches to decision-making (participatory and non-participatory) and are used to set out the processes implemented in the case studies.

The next slide shows project development steps. These steps indicate how engagement is used in each of these approaches. On the journey towards making a decision, there are the inputs (data, perspectives, factors considered in deciding options); the engagement activities; the outputs from engagement; and the outcomes on decision-making processes.



**Inputs**



**Activities**



**Outputs**



**Outcomes**

### Non-participatory

A decision or suggested approach.  
 Established systems and processes.  
 Some, but limited, officer time.  
 Limited participation time (if any) from stakeholders.  
 Lower cost.

**Inform:** Public notices; leaflets; public meetings.  
**Consult:** Statutory consultations, online surveys, written submissions (often tied together), public meetings.  
 Whole community may have access to these (but does not always engage or is not always accessible). Methods tend to focus on individual and top of mind responses.

Information shared.  
 Consultation responses received and used to influence plans.  
 Decisions documented.  
 Legal requirements met (where applicable).

Public aware of the decision (this can vary based on the effectiveness of communications).  
 Public have had the opportunity to express individual views.  
 Local authority has some understanding of public perspectives, often from a non-representative group.



Inputs



Activities



Outputs



Outcomes

## Participatory

A question/questions which need to be answered; a strategy or policy area which will be informed through the engagement.

Expert and often independent involvement: design, facilitation etc. More complex design.

Substantial officer time required. Substantial participant time and added costs for participation (such as incentives)

Higher cost

**Engage:** A range of participatory engagement approaches may be used, all which allow for group discussion and development of ideas, for example: citizen visioning, citizens' assemblies, public dialogues (more information on methods can be found [here](#)).

A sample of participants are chosen via random selection; they are given support to participate to ensure diversity of views are reflected.

Information shared.

Community voices, local knowledge and lived experience captured.

Shared understanding of trade-offs, conditions of acceptability, and perspectives of a representative public.

A set of recommendations, principles or actions

Decisions documented.

May not meet legal requirements if not accompanied by wider consultation.

Public aware of the decision (this can vary based on size of participatory engagement and how well-publicised it is).

Representative or diverse group of the public has substantial influence on final decisions being made.

Public and local authority have improved understanding of each others' perspectives, and public has greater trust in local authority decision-making. This increases public buy-in in decisions.

Local authority has a clear set of recommendations/principles/trade-offs agreed by the public to help guide decision-making.

## 4. Illustrative case studies

The final section of this report outlines five illustrative case studies, informed by five local authority interviews, that explore examples where financial and other costs have been incurred from decisions made without public participatory engagement. The fifth case study illustrates an example where participatory engagement has supported local authorities in the face of a complex and potentially controversial issue. The case studies have been mapped against the project development steps to identify the point at which additional or unexpected costs were incurred in these examples.

These case studies identify where and how participatory engagement may have helped avoid the additional costs explored earlier in this report. These points at which unexpected costs were incurred were primarily during the activities and outputs/outcome project development steps within these case studies.

# Case study 1: Low resident engagement with a programme of work

**What happened?** A programme, funded by central government but implemented by local authorities, provided funding to deliver energy efficiency upgrades to ~500 homes in a Combined Authority area. Of these, only 25 were achieved, with most of these being identified through word-of-mouth instead of proactive engagement with local areas. Money, time, and effort that had been spent on setting up and carrying out the programme were not recoverable (“sunk costs”).



## Inputs

The programme was backed by government grant funding to deliver energy efficiency upgrades, including contractor time. At least one full-time officer was in place, supported by a small number of staff. Funding was provided by central government with a tight, two-year delivery window, and strict eligibility criteria set by central modelling rather than local need.



## Activities

The programme (including engagement) could only start once funding had been awarded, meaning there was no opportunity for officers to scope potentially eligible households or areas in advance of them being identified for delivery (that is, installing upgrades in homes). Communication activities supporting the programme were also constrained, as many households were not eligible so the team could not promote widely. Some engagement activities did take place later in delivery, such as taking an area-led approach with door-knocking and work with community groups, but language and cultural barriers in targeted areas were not fully accounted for in this work and presented barriers to engagement.



## Outputs

Awareness among eligible households was low, meaning referrals and engagement with the programme were minimal. This may have been exacerbated by overlapping offers locally causing confusion. Against an ambition of upgrading 500 homes, only 25 were upgraded, and most were identified through word of mouth rather than active outreach and engagement.

# Case study 1: Low resident engagement with a programme of work



## Outcomes

The programme under-delivered against its targets. This meant officers and suppliers for delivery had less work to do, despite being contracted, and damaged the local authority team's reputation which then risks dampening community interest in future offers. As a result, the local authority was unable to claim back much of what they had spent, as funding depended on delivery. Internally, the team delivering the work will be applying learnings to the next stage of this funding.



## What were the costs of not engaging?

**Financial costs:** £250,000 spent, only £60,000 was recoverable.

**Non-financial costs:** Unrecouped staff time; late promotional spend with low return.

**How could participatory engagement have helped?** While the nature of this funding may have stopped preliminary scoping work (with tight timelines and staff not recruited until funding had been awarded), early participatory engagement to understand the needs of target communities may have been beneficial in the following ways:

- Leaving more of the design of funding programmes to local government could help shape success or nature of the programmes by building in public participation stages at the local level to understand local needs.
- Early community needs and eligibility mapping could have helped establish eligible properties. This engagement could have highlighted their needs to be able to access the scheme and shed light on unknown barriers or support needs.
- Wider local authority efforts to build trusted relationships may have helped engagement with community groups that may be more difficult to engage. For example, this could have helped overcome the challenges faced in language and cultural barriers when these groups were engaged, by building trust between local authority officers and these groups.
- The stakeholder interviewed suggested the need for engagement officers, who could be hired and not tied to a particular piece of funding or programme of work, instead presenting a consistent and trusted voice.

# Case study 2: Time-pressured street space decisions

**What happened?** Rapid road layout changes (including pop-up lanes, filters, and reallocations of traffic control measures) were implemented with limited consultation during the COVID-19 lockdown period via an Experimental Traffic Regulation Order (ETRO). In this area, the road layout changes were intended to improve accessibility of high streets and to encourage greater active travel and public transport uptake. The public reacted negatively to these changes, feeling they had been imposed without their views being sought. This triggered freedom of information (FOI) requests, complaints, and backlash on social media as well as damaged trust and reduced receptiveness to later schemes by the same local authority team.



## Inputs

ETRO powers enabled rapid installation without full consultation. Funding was provided to encourage active travel and public transport. Delivery teams faced tight deadlines and had limited capacity for communications and engagement. Reduced travel during the pandemic allowed a swift roll-out.



## Activities

Measures were installed rapidly with limited consultation. Engagement was largely retrospective, with public forums and online consultations once the changes were in place. Additional forums were convened in response to backlash.



## Outputs

Pop-up cycle lanes and modal filters were implemented, including a full road closure to road traffic on a high street. Public reaction included FOI requests and complaints, including on social media, requiring officer time to respond.

# Case study 2: Time-pressured street space decisions



## Outcomes

Subsequent schemes from the same team received similarly negative responses, with residents having developed perceptions of poor governance and a lack of transparency. Staff time was diverted from other programmes to reactive work, impacting the delivery of other services. Public views became somewhat polarised on the issue, and campaign groups took opposing positions and became dominant voices.

## What were the costs of not engaging?



**Financial costs:** Equivalent time of 1 FTE member of staff to respond to concerns.

**Non-financial costs:** Time not spent on other programmes due to reallocated staff time, reputational costs and impact on future engagement. Polarisation became more standard, impacting other schemes.

**How could participatory engagement have helped?** These schemes took place in an exceptional period (the COVID-19 pandemic lock down), when engagement was challenging. However, participatory engagement may have helped avoid these costs in the following ways:

- Co-design or engagement to understand public perspectives, needs, and usage may have meant changes to road space and usage were more acceptable to the public and reflected their preferences: either shaping what the changes were, or how they were implemented.
- Participatory engagement could have increased transparency on the 'why' behind decision and allowed for conversation on the rapidly-installed measures, even if after implementation, to understand how they could be improved.
- Participatory engagement could also have mitigated the feeling of changes being imposed, particularly for those directly affected.

# Case study 3: Changing access to healthcare

**What happened?** Following a review with decision-makers and stakeholders, a local health board proposed reconfiguring hospital services offered locally, including changes to A&E services. This was seen by the public as a service loss with insufficient consultation, and triggered sustained opposition, including public protests and two judicial reviews. Ultimately, despite the judicial reviews ruling that the health board had conducted sufficient consultation (which included opportunities for written responses, information-sharing, and engagement with stakeholders), the recommendations to reconfigure the services offered in local hospitals were not adopted, and the issue was not resolved, resulting in the same questions being raised again later.



## Inputs

Significant internal analysis and clinical review were undertaken prior to public engagement; after this, there was a period of public and stakeholder consultation. The healthcare board signed off on the decision.



## Activities

Statutory engagement included publishing recommendations and information documents, followed by running a formal consultation, including opportunities for written responses.



## Outputs

The board proposed reconfiguring services at two hospitals, including A&E and some neonatal services. Organised public opposition followed, including demonstrations and two judicial reviews. The fairness of the consultation process was subject to intense scrutiny.

# Case study 3: Changing access to healthcare



## Outcomes

The recommendations were not adopted, the issue remained unresolved and then resurfaced later. There were longer term impacts on clinical provision and future pathways for care, alongside reduced public trust. The organisation reflected on the importance of sequencing engagement and taking staff, elected members, and the public along with them for decision-making.



## What were the costs of not engaging?

**Financial costs:** approximately £300,000 in legal defence.

**Non-financial costs:** Substantial officer/board time; costs of reversing decision; future costs of service and clinical provision not being changed; 'wasted' review budget; prolonged delays to services; loss of public trust.

**How could participatory engagement have helped?** In this case, the board was found to have met the statutory requirements for engaging the public. Despite this, some members of the public still felt inadequately engaged. Participatory engagement may have helped avoid these costs in the following ways:

- Participatory engagement with residents and/or service users can bring them into the challenge, providing an opportunity to discuss the challenges and options, and make recommendations on trade-offs and acceptability. This may also include accepting alternatives to service provision.
- Public participation may provide a route to new ideas for tackling difficult decisions, with the collective imagination of a diverse group of people producing previously unconsidered options.
- Participatory decision-making at an early stage could include public co-design of messaging to ensure it will be received well.
- Public participation using a mini-public can give legitimacy to decisions, when the public see that a diverse group of people like them have been involved in decision-making, they may be more likely to accept that decision even if they have not been involved themselves.

# Case study 4: Using co-design to de-risk multi-partner delivery

**What happened?** A major historic transport scheme in an urban combined authority was under development with funding secured. However, the constituent local authorities had different views on how the scheme should be progressed, which resulted in public conflict and the overall programme being cancelled. This cancellation was subject to public interest reporting, and there was considerable public outcry and lost trust in the relevant local authorities because of this.



## Inputs

A transport authority held funding and powers for a major historic transport scheme. Delivery and engagement depended on agreement from constituent councils.



## Activities

The scheme development progressed without sustained agreement from delivery partners (local authorities). Traditional public consultation drew uneven or low engagement and was often dominated by objectors. This meant that conflicting priorities were not managed or trade-offs discussed sufficiently, particularly on what different local areas wanted from the transport plan.



## Outputs

Misalignments across authorities emerged, and the programme became the subject of public interest reporting. There was also public outcry when the scheme failed leading to a loss of trust in the Transport Authority and the constituent local authorities.

# Case study 4: Using co-design to de-risk multi-partner delivery



## Outcomes

The scheme was cancelled, resulting in £multi-million sunk costs, reputational damage, loss of time-limited funding, and an erosion of public trust and mandate. However, this has led to a shift in the approach to engagement for the new Local Transport Plan (LTP, now led by the Combined Authority) with participatory methods embedded from the outset as well as improved governance across the City Region. Engagement includes having a dedicated and resourced engagement strategy, supported by external funding; co-design at the vision and draft policy stages with users and non-users, with consultations being iterative and engaging with accessible materials; and a 'you said, we did' thread linking public input to policy refinement. This inclusive approach has also led to greater alignment between constituent local authorities and support for the Local Transport Plan.



## What were the costs of not engaging?

**Financial costs: multi-million sunk cost from collapsed major scheme:** The interviewee compared this to the mid-five to low-six figure engagement budget for the new LTP, feeling this avoided those additional costs.

**Non-financial costs:** Reputational damage from non-delivery of scheme; loss of time-limited funding; public trust and mandate.

## How could participatory engagement have helped?

- If the initial scheme plans had been informed by participatory engagement, local authorities may have had a clearer mandate from local communities on priorities, taking account of trade-offs, which should have led to greater local authority buy-in.
- Participatory engagement on the new LTP helped achieve buy-in from residents as they considered the Plan to be legitimate and applicable to both users and non-users. For example, safety on public transport has been prioritised as a result.
- This approach required more investment at the outset, compared with statutory consultation, but avoided £multi-million sunk costs of non-delivered schemes following on from a lack of support for the previous scheme.

# Case study 5: Co-designing trusted information to support low-carbon technology adoption

**What happened?** A local authority in an urban area has been developing a district heat network. Research found there were substantial knowledge gaps in how much residents knew about district heat networks, posing a significant challenge to the council, as awareness and understanding of these networks is critical in ensuring their take-up across the local area. The council engaged the public in two ways: a pilot, tailored customer journey for 16 homes to encourage them to sign-up; and a citizen visioning process with residents to understand how they envision future energy systems in their area, and how these should work for residents. The council has now formalised the research-based approach into a communication and engagement strategy for the wider roll-out of the heat network based on learnings from dual engagement methods.



## Inputs

A council had been developing its district heat network for several years, to decarbonise heat and strengthen local energy security. The network's next stage was to expand into residential areas, but research illuminated significant knowledge gaps amongst residents. The council felt that residents' awareness and trust would be critical in them choosing to connect.



## Activities

The council launched dual engagement efforts: a pilot customer journey for installing heat networks in 16 homes, using behavioural insights at each contact point intending to provide simple, accessible, and clear information; and ran a citizen visioning process with partner organisations, asking residents about what they wanted future energy systems to look like in the area, and how this can be done in a way that works for residents.



## Outputs

All 16 of the homes in the customer journey pilot agreed to connect to the heat network. Residents in the citizen visioning workshops generated an energy vision statement and submitted 10 priority recommendations to the council, providing advice on factors to enable residents to support largescale energy schemes in the area.

# Case study 5: Co-designing trusted information to support low-carbon technology adoption



## Outcomes

Based on insights from both engagement methods, the local authority is now formalising a on-stop-shop communication strategy to expand the heat network to residential properties. They reported the following key learnings: that accessible materials and visibility of new technologies can build confidence; that trust can be fostered with in-person contact and peer advocacy; and that direct engagement is a better than awareness-raising alone to build confidence and support for low-carbon technologies like heat networks. There have already been tangible ways in which these lessons have been implemented, including showcasing heat networks in a public exhibition, increasing the home visits and exploring hiring a tenant liaison, and re-engaging households who had already connected to the heat network to form a network of advocates to provide support.



## What costs were associated with engaging the public?

**Financial costs:** £80,000-£100,000 to run the citizen visioning process.

**Non-financial costs:** Due to full engagement, no known additional costs were incurred.

## How did participatory engagement help the furthering of this scheme?

- Participatory engagement helped turn an unfamiliar concept into something more familiar and understandable for residents. Informing the public in a clear, tangible way on what signing up for the heat network would be like and how it would work increased understanding and confidence, in turn supporting greater engagement.
- Citizen visioning helped build the local authority's understanding of residents' experiences, what they wanted the future of energy systems to look like in their areas, and what enabling factors would need to be in place to support them. This allowed the council to move from advising the public to having a conversation with them, enabling solutions to be designed to align more closely with resident priorities and needs. In turn, this meant that moving forward there is likely to be greater trust and confidence in the local authority's goals.

# 5. Conclusion

Citizen engagement is a core feature of decision-making in local government and bringing public voices into conversations about policy, programme design, and the future of their place or the services they use is vitally important.

Participatory engagement provides residents with the opportunity to contribute meaningfully and significantly to the decision-making process, but upfront cost is often seen as a barrier. In the context of local authorities' struggling for resources, this makes a compelling argument.

This exploratory research suggests that when meaningful public engagement does not happen, local authorities can see large additional and unexpected costs that often exceed the cost of participatory engagement.

Across our illustrative case studies, additional costs arose when decisions did not incorporate substantive public involvement. These costs were both financial and non-financial, impacting the reputation of local authorities, the trust residents had in their decisions, and necessitating re-allocation of time and resources towards managing unexpected backlash.

Non-participatory engagement can lead to constrained and reactive communications due to lack of ability to influence from the outset. This can result in redesign or legal challenge driving additional and unexpected costs.

The participatory approach invests upfront in creating shared understanding and incorporating residents' views into the decision-making process from the start. While not removing disagreement, participatory engagement can make decisions more transparent to residents, and lead to more sustainable implementation as the decisions should better reflect residents' values and priorities. This model can also help de-risk delivery.

If co-design, accessible materials, iterative consultations, clear governance, and a 'you said, we did' thread are embedded from the outset, alignment between partners should improve, buy-in from users and non-users should increase and policies should better reflect local concerns.

# Implications for local authorities and future research

## Implications for local authorities:

- Both non-participatory and participatory engagement carry costs. The participatory approach can help prevent larger, unplanned costs later, particularly when supporting statutory engagement.
- Risks are greatest for complex and sensitive decisions. Early engagement on values, priorities, and acceptability is important to mitigate public backlash over tough decisions being made.
- Meaningful participation improves design and delivery by identifying needs, barriers to uptake, and practical solutions, especially for those most affected.

This exploratory research has focused on illustrative case studies of local authorities where participatory engagement has not been undertaken and has resulted in unexpected costs. Future research could examine these trends on a broader, more systematic scale, comparing local authority decision-making across the country and examining more examples.