ENGAGING COMMUNITIES: CO PRODUCING WELLBEING

This local government bulletin, developed in association with Belfast Healthy Cities, is the third in a series looking at the concept of wellbeing and its relevance to local government.   Issue 1 focused on introducing the definitions of wellbeing, while Issue 2 explored ways to measure wellbeing. This issue considers the importance of engaging communities in the co production of wellbeing.

WHY ENGAGE COMMUNITIES

The key message of Issue 2 was that statistical evidence provides a general framework for monitoring change, including the impact of programmes and initiatives. Engaging residents and communities is equally as important to provide the context behind the statistics; for example how peoples circumstances shape their lives, what supports their wellbeing and why some initiatives work better than others. The specific mix of factors will be unique to each community and therefore engaging residents in a co production process helps understanding of what wellbeing looks like in a given neighbourhood. It also helps identify locally relevant and workable solutions and offers opportunities to build relationships.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ENGAGEMENT

Effective community engagement is an ongoing process, where residents, businesses and organisations have an opportunity to contribute to planning, evaluation and refinement of policies, programmes and initiatives. Importantly, effective engagement is a two way process where residents and stakeholders can expect to see how their input influenced decisions, while decision makers can both challenge ideas and seek clarification. This is known as co production, and builds on the core principle that a collaborative approach strengthens local governance.

A critical element of successful community engagement / co production is a strong commitment to the approach as a way of doing business. An open dialogue builds trust with residents and communities, which in itself is a cornerstone of wellbeing.   A clear scope and purpose for all engagement activities, including clear limits for what can and cannot be changed, is also essential, to ensure transparency and help participants understand their role in the process.

TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

A wide range of techniques and tools are available to support engagement / co production processes. They differ in focus and intended outcome, and can serve different purposes. Therefore, a toolkit including a range of tools and techniques is helpful to ensure the most effective approach is used, depending on desired outcome.

Surveys are often used to gather information, or gauge the view of residents on a given topic. They can be circulated to a wide target group, and can be analysed statistically. However, surveys are limited on the depth of information that can be gathered and require respondents to be motivated to participate.

Focus groups and public meetings offer the opportunity to explore issues and experiences in more detail. These approaches can be effective if meetings are organized at times and in locations that suit residents. Integrating sessions into meetings of existing groups is one option; another is working with local organizations to identify the most appropriate approach.

Working with schools and youth groups is another option to engage children and young people, who often bring a new perspective to the discussion and can become very positively engaged if they feel they are heard and respected.

Engagement can also be part of community fun days, business breakfasts and networking events. Such informal approaches can engage a wide range of people, and can be particularly helpful for engaging harder to reach groups. They also provide community activities that encourage participation.

Online and social media approaches can also engage a wide range of stakeholders. These approaches include platforms for ongoing feedback, as well as platforms that invite comment on specific initiatives. The essential element is ensuring a degree of interaction with decision makers, to reassure users that comments are utilised in decision making and service planning.

EXAMPLES
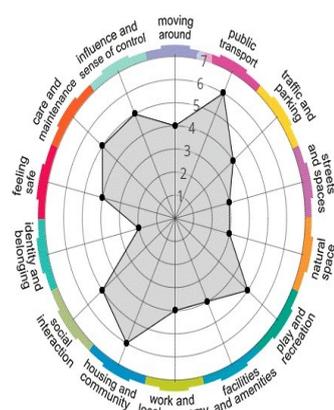
The Scottish Place Standard

The Place Standard is a tool developed by the Scottish Government in collaboration with NHS Public Health Scotland, local authorities and developers to support engagement with local communities about place. It is an evidence based tool structured around key physical and social qualities of a place, which is designed to support engagement with residents to explore how they experience a given place or community, and how it could be improved. The tool has been piloted in neighbourhoods across Scotland and is increasingly used to support local decision

The Dueneane Collective—exploring co production

The regional Community Development and health network is supporting co production pilots that include capacity building of local residents, local events and engagement with decision makers. The Dueane Collective, based in Toome, is one example that was developed in collaboration with Antrim and Newtownabbey District Council.

An outline of the approach is available at hhttps://vimeo.com/204502501

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