

# Prototyping Report

Public Square | Calderdale Metropolitan Borough

# What's in this Report

This report describes how we prototyped new approaches to citizen engagement in Calderdale and what we have learnt from this work.

We partnered with Calderdale Council but also worked closely with the wider community through a co-design process.

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# 1) Our Goals

## Public Square

Public Square is a two-year action research programme investigating what is needed to improve participation as a system. In its first year, Public Square is working with a small number of councils to develop and pilot innovative approaches to citizen participation in decision making. Through this process we hope to learn more about how meaningful participation can flourish.

## Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council

Calderdale Council recognises the importance of working in a collaborative way with citizens and other local stakeholders. Indeed, it believes that this is important to tackle the challenges all councils face and to maximise the opportunities its community has.

To explore this potential, Calderdale wanted to develop a new approach to public engagement, ultimately branded 'Calderdale Conversations', during the summer of 2019. Several aims were outlined for this, including:

- Building an understanding of the position that the council is in;
- Exploring residents' priorities for the future; and
- Exploring what the relationship (and implicit contract) between residents and the council should be.

The topic could cover things such as:

- What the role of the council should be going forward; recognising that the council and local democracy have changed and are still changing. And exploring the role of a place-based approach within this.
- What is the informal agreement between the council and residents, what would a partnership look like?
- What role residents are willing to play to achieve the type of place they want Calderdale to be?
- How this could work for all residents, businesses, visitors etc?
- If, and how, digital can enable better collaboration?

As part of our discovery work, we tried to establish a clear picture of the Council's aims and requirements for this conversation. This included:

- The conversation should involve a wide range of citizens, not just those most likely to speak up.
- Conversations about future priorities for the borough should be informed by evidence, and deliberation.
- There should be an online aspect to reach greater numbers of residents.

- Conversations should be used to establish relationships and techniques that can be drawn upon in future, by local partners, not just the council itself. There was a shared sense that rather than delivering a one-off project Calderdale Conversations was about developing an ongoing way of working.

It was clear, as a result of these principles, that Calderdale Conversations should involve residents in its design.

Public Square would act as a partner to the Council, rather than working for them. This would help us to ensure that our work would focus on and involve the wider system of local democracy.

There is more information about the Calderdale context in our [discovery report](#).

## 2) What We Did: Developing Prototypes

Our design approach was strongly informed by a desire to design this conversation with local residents. This was done primarily through two co-design workshops and a communications workshop.

### Co-design workshop 1

23rd May 2019

The aim of this workshop was to generate prototypes for building a conversation over the summer. These would then be tested during the course of the summer conversation.



#### Who was there?

We brought together a group of about 25 participants - active citizens and members of a range of local groups, joined by some council officers. Participants were recruited by the council from existing contacts, having made the conscious decision to start with those who are already involved and build further. The council also tried to cover some of the diversity within the local community and the group included a range of different community groups, ethnicities and ages, including young people.

#### What happened?

After a quick icebreaker we started off by asking participants about the current reality of how residents can already engage with and influence local decisions. After this we used some stretch questions to get people thinking creatively including asking what the worst way of running a conversation over the summer would be. Then we asked for quick-fire ideas of how the council could engage with residents over the summer and used dot-voting to choose between groups' favourite suggestions and identify people's top four ideas.

To give inspiration about the range of possibilities we printed out a set of slides showing possible approaches that were spread across the tables for participants to use if helpful. The two slides decks used for this are shared through the links below:

[Offline inspiration](#)

[Digital inspiration](#)

For the remainder of the session our groups worked up these ideas using a project poster template to get them thinking about their problem statement, big idea, and what steps would be needed to make the project happen.

## Outcomes

By the end of the workshop we had ideas for four prototypes that the group had selected and started to develop up:

- **A Listening Sofa** - using a mobile sofa to create an informal space where people talk about what they wanted. This would include encouraging residents to talk with each other.
- **Supermarket-style slot voting** - where people could cast a publicly visible vote between particular options, similar to the slots used by supermarkets to decide which charity will receive a donation.
- **Pop-up screens** - either digital or analogue, these would be places to share information (including feeding back from earlier conversations) and hear from residents.
- **Mobile apps** - to access information about your local area, and access services. As well as a 'two way' aspect where you can vote on local issues, take part in discussions, and provide feedback.

You can [access a full write-up of the session online here](#)

## Feedback

At the end we asked participants to fill in a short feedback form. People told us they enjoyed the chance to work collaboratively, and to do so in a creative way. However,

there was real difficulty with grasping what the expectations were for the summer conversations, and thus what people were being asked to design.

## Communications workshop - Refining the narrative

21<sup>st</sup> June 2019

The aim of this workshop was for to spend time on creating a clear narrative of the project and the role and purpose of the conversations. (Participants at our co-design workshop had told us it was sometimes difficult to understand the aims of the project, so it was important to address this.)

### Who was there?

The workshop brought together council officers and members of the Public Square team. It was run by members of the council's communications team and held in Demsoc's Manchester office at Federation House, which created an atmosphere that helped all of us think creatively.

### What happened?

We used a variety of exercises such as imagining how things would look different in Calderdale if these conversations were a success, to create a clearer statement of the project's aims.

It became clear that much of the difficulty was coming from a desire to define an end point for the engagement. Building an open-ended conversation was a problem for the way that communications and engagement is usually approached. Often, council officers, elected members, and residents - as well as practitioners like those involved in Public Square - are more comfortable being part of a more defined process with a preconceived aim, end or process. Working on something more open-ended requires a different way of thinking about communication and that can be a challenge.

You can read more about the workshop in [this blogpost](#), written by a member of Calderdale's comms team. After the workshop it was decided to use the name 'Calderdale Conversations' for the planned conversations.

### Outcomes

You can see the resulting narrative below - which was used by the council both internally and externally:

*In Calderdale we believe in the power that people and communities have to bring about change, to have a say in what happens on their doorstep. In other words, we believe in democracy.*

*But we can't take democracy for granted. It needs looking after - here, by us - and if we don't protect it, and trust it, democracy will break. And it could stay broken.*

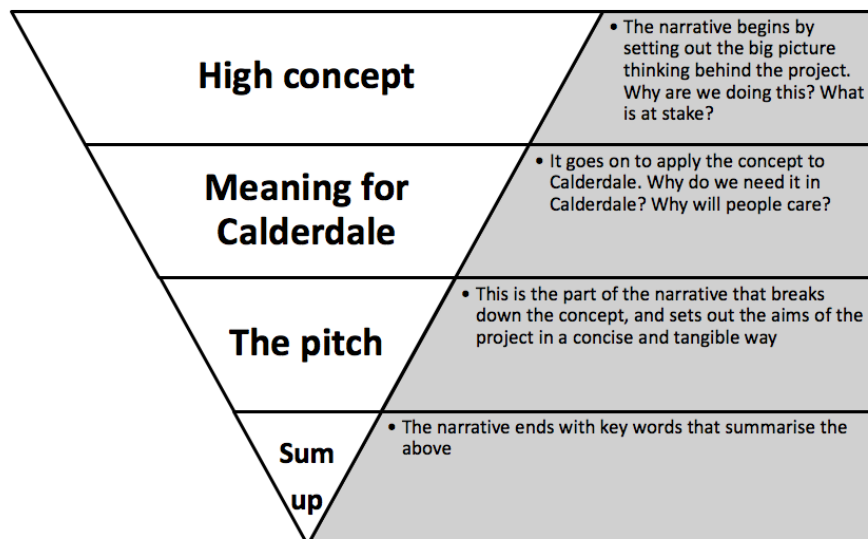
*In Calderdale we might not always talk about 'politics' in our everyday lives, but we are having conversations about our health, transport, children, elderly relatives, streets and schools. We care about the future.*

*Calderdale Conversations will provide an opportunity to listen to people using what we learn to shape our future priorities as a Council. This approach will mean more communication, more often, working together on things that are important to us all, sharing the thinking, the doing, to make Calderdale a better place.*

*Unheard voices will be heard. Opinions will be valued. People will see their influence and the impact of their work. This is about reaching our **Vision** for Calderdale - building relationships and trust.*

*This place is ours, and we can shape it together.*

The image below shows how the narrative has been structured:





# Co-Design Workshop 2

11th July 2019

The aim of this workshop was;

- to test out the prototypes and develop these further,
- to start an engagement plan for putting these into practice,
- to encourage participants to volunteer for putting these into practice if there were willing, and
- to learn more about training needs for putting these into action.



Participants using '[scenes](#)' to picture the prototypes in action

## Who was there?

We invited back the active citizens from the first workshop alongside staff from the council and one of the council's new councillors. We had 14 participants on the day, however only two of these were members of the public.

It was disappointing not to get more citizen participants coming back. Possibly this reflected some of the challenges participants had encountered at the first workshop. There was also concern that we were asking quite a lot of unpaid participants. Also, while we'd shared the outputs from the last workshop with participants, it was a

challenge to keep them updated as much as we'd originally hoped. Council staff were having to juggle this additional task alongside the rest of their workloads.

## What happened?

To tackle previous uncertainties, we started off with a presentation about the aims for the planned conversations by a member of the council's comms team.

We then asked groups to think what our set of prototypes would look like in practice and consider whether these needed changing or could be developed further. To do this, we created tabletop 3D models using the open-source resource '[scenes](#)'. Scenes is a group of images of everyday scenarios that can be printed out and drawn on by participants to help them picture what things will look like in practice.

After the first workshop we reviewed the four prototypes with members of the project team in the council and considered how they could be put into practice. We decided that the 'Mobile Apps' idea was currently too broad and ambitious, so revisited this by running a 'digital corner' at this workshop so participants could explore how digital technology could be used as part of the conversation.

Calderdale Engagement Plan 2019-2020						
Who? Who is your target audience?	Where? Which environment or event?	When? What is the best time for this group?	Which prototype? Which idea will work for this group?	What? What will you ask? What are your conversation openers?	How? How will you make this happen and meet the needs of your group?	

An image of the Engagement Planning template used during the workshop

We created a huge calendar covering the period of the planned conversations and asked participants to add in events and activities happening during this period that could be piggybacked on to reach different parts of the community. And asked groups to start filling in template engagement plans with ideas for how their prototypes could be put to use in promising settings across the borough.

We also asked participants: How will what we hear change Calderdale? How will residents know they have made a difference? And what learning and support needs are there for running these conversations?

## Outcomes

One immediate outcome was that two participants from the neighbourhoods team were inspired to test the listening sofa out at a community fun day the next weekend! Before the session had even ended, they were on the phone to several community contacts to successfully get hold of a sofa. We arrived back into the office the next week to see a tweet of the sofa already in action.



A tweet from the first trial of the listening sofa.

During the workshop participants shared several ideas for places to test out the prototypes and local events that could be piggybacked on. We pulled this information into two documents that were set up as collaborative documents that anyone could add to:

[A Calendar of Opportunities](#); and [An Engagement Plan](#)

Feedback about the prototypes was used to create method statements for using these, which were designed to give a clear guide to how these prototypes could be used to start up conversations:

[Prototype method statements.](#)

There was a wide-ranging discussion in 'digital corner' which didn't arrive at a specific prototype but was later taken forward through the idea of an online hub about the conversations.

Participant's views about how Calderdale will change from these conversations, and how residents will know they have made a difference were mainly about the need to clearly communicate how views are acted on, including explaining when things can't be delivered. There was also a hope that this conversation might lead to a change of attitude and different ways of working between the council, residents and voluntary and community groups. At the same time there was some concern that the conversation wouldn't change things within the Council, and one person felt the focus should be on encouraging community action rather than waiting on the council.

Learning and support needs that participants expressed were:

- The need to listen differently, and for listening training across the council, voluntary and community sector.
- A need to understand what resources are available within the Council, and for a central point to coordinate different pieces of engagement that the council was carrying out or taking part in.
- The importance of using the skills of community members and keeping in touch with projects that are already happening in the community.
- Concern about an increased demand on already stretched staff. It was suggested that staff should be supported to use different ways of working and managing demands and given systems like Client Relationship Management and Data Management tools to achieve this. And that this should be delivered across the council, rather than just being held by the neighbourhoods team.
- A call to celebrate things that are already done well, and a call for the conversation to be resident, rather than council led.

Alongside the feedback form we asked participants to say how they'd like to be involved in the future and invited them to leave their details so we could follow up.



Nine people handed back forms saying how they'd like to be involved in running Calderdale Conversations activities.

You can find out more about this workshop in our [workshop write-up](#).

## **Feedback**

At the end of the workshop we gave out a short feedback form. (You can see full feedback received in our workshop write up)

Some of the positives raised about the workshop were:

- Testing techniques out and learning about different techniques.
- Talking with a diverse range of colleagues and working together in small groups.
- The 'scenes' tool used and the energy in the room.
- One person added that they wanted to get out and test these in the real world rather than doing so internally.

Some suggestions for improvement were:

- Making the session shorter
- Sharing templates that people could have filled out in advance
- More resident involvement
- More rotation through the different prototypes to work on all of them
- Focussing more time and energy on 'what we are doing to do', presumably meaning creating the plan of engagement activities.
- Having a distinct session on digital, bringing together more people working on this in the council. And one called for more networking sessions, first finding out who has the info needed, and then sharing this.

We also asked participants what their main takeaways from the workshop were, which included:

- Learning how much is already happening and learning "about different methods of engagement and problems faced by more experienced colleagues".
- Learning how hard digital solutions can be.
- The importance of engagement activities being measurable.
- The need for a different way of listening: "The sofa...the essence is listening and we should be doing that in everything we do - sofa is just one way.'
- The need to work better across the council and 'how much more joined up we need to be in our thinking'.
- A desire to get started: "To look out for these prototypes and lend my support".

## Developing the website

At the second public workshop there had been extended discussion over what role digital tools could have in the wider project. Some participants felt that there should be a companion website for people to suggest and vote on ideas to improve Calderdale. Other people felt these activities should be in-person done using the other prototypes, leaving the website as a marketing page for “Calderdale Conversations” that would become a public record of its activities, and a guide for how people could get involved by hosting their own events using the toolkit (the sofa, the voting boxes, etc).

Following these conversations, a design lead in the council created mock-ups of what a “voting”-style website could look like. These were discussed with the Public Square team, and together with the council we talked through some of the challenges with encouraging participation on a site like this, and how the site would combine with the in-person idea generation and vote casting (sofa, voting boxes, info boards). As at the public workshop, there was some back and forth between the idea of a website as a tool for idea generation and voting, or a website as a purely digital signpost to the in-person engagements.

To move things on, the Public Square team put together a very [quick prototype](#) of how a simple, informational site could look – listing engagement activities (sofa appearances, voting box locations, etc) by type and location, with photos and descriptive text, as well as more general “marketing” information about the process as a whole, and how organisations could get involved as a steering partner or host an engagement.

The council team took the idea of an informational website as the initial version of the prototype and implemented it, using some embeddable widgets to pull in a calendar and social media feeds. The finished site was made available online: <https://www.calderdale.gov.uk/v2/council/our-vision/calderdale-conversations>

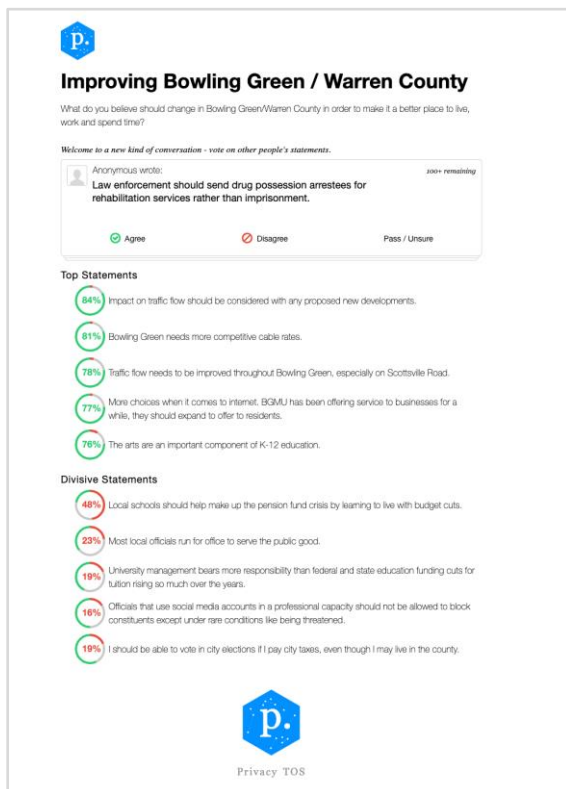
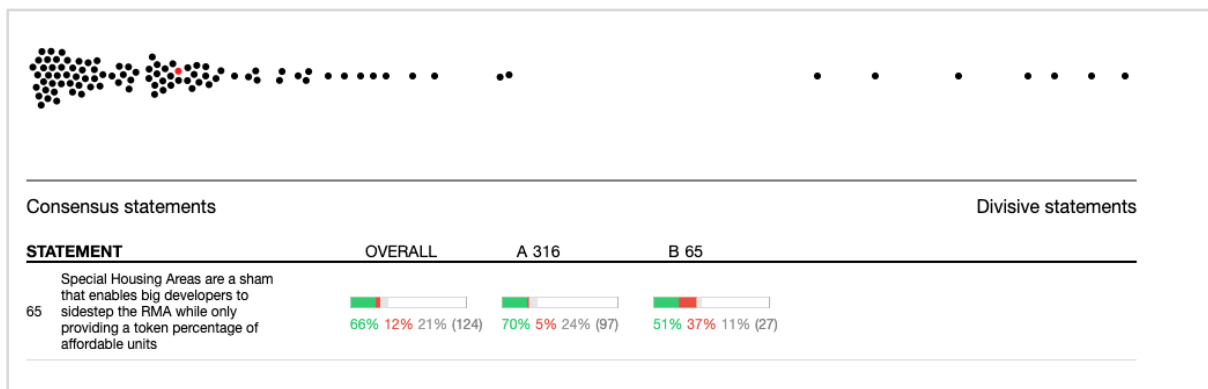
Discussion then turned internally to whether digital tools could encourage a more interactive mode of engagement. We shared a presentation outlining different kinds of tools – place-based and concept-based consultation tools, idea generation tools and cluster and wikisurvey tools. And talked in more detail about three tools specifically;

- **Your Priorities**<sup>1</sup> is a civic technology platform, developed by the Icelandic non-profit Citizens Foundation. It allows people to add ideas online with a supporting description, images, and video and to vote positively or negatively on each idea and add discussion points for or against it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.yrpri.org/domain/3>

- **All Our Ideas**<sup>2</sup> is a wikisurvey<sup>3</sup> platform that offers people a choice between two ideas at a time with the opportunity to add ideas of their own, resulting in a set of ideas ranked by popularity.
- **Polis**<sup>4</sup> is another wikisurvey platform that aims to inform decision-making with AI-driven analysis. It works by creating a “conversation” that participants engage with by adding opinion statements and voting on the opinion statements of others. The backend uses statistical analysis to visualizing correlations between opinions and participants, sorting participants into opinion groups, and surfacing areas of consensus and divisiveness.



An example of results obtained using Pol.is

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.allourideas.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/crowdsourcing-democracy-using-wikisurveys/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://pol.is/>

**Advantages of these tools:**

- We felt Polis and, to a lesser extent, All Our Ideas, would be good choices. Unlike many consultation and idea generation tools in use in the UK, they don't place a strong structural framework on the interaction, allowing participants to take the online conversation in unexpected directions.
- There is an addictiveness to their simple mode of use. When you vote on a statement or pair of statements, the interface immediately refreshes with a new statement or pair, so participants tend to make several decisions without finding it arduous.
- The analysis backend of Polis allows staff to gather insight about views on subjects of interest to the Council whilst residents drive the direction. It also gives insight into how much support there is for statements and whether that correlates with support for others.

These tools do, of course, suffer from the same risk of being used by a non-representative set of participants as other online tools, but they present interesting opportunities to gather information at an earlier point in policy formation without being overwhelmed by a large set of qualitative data that is difficult to analyse.

The web team at the council initially favoured Your Priorities. However, after further discussion there was interest in pursuing an experiment with using Polis. At the time of writing, the Calderdale Conversations site was live, but had not been used to host interactive discussions.



# Training Workshop

28th August 2019

The aim of the training workshop was to help those who would be going out and using the prototypes to get ready for the summer activities.



Participants taking part in a listening exercise

## Who was there:

It was largely council staff, plus some council partners and one member of the public who had attended the earlier workshops. We had approximately 35 attendees spread across the two sessions (one in the morning and one in the afternoon so that more people could make it).

Members of the council's training team came along to these so that they could cascade this training onto other staff and any potential volunteers afterwards.

## What happened?

After asking about hopes and fears for Calderdale Conversations we used a series of exercises which participants rotated through to help them think through how to put these conversations into practice. Ahead of the workshop we shared the prototype method statements which we'd created.

We used a [Plan, Do, Review template](#), applied to a fictional scenario to ask questions like:

- What are we planning to learn?
- How can we minimise barriers?
- Are there safety considerations to be aware of?

We also shared a range of materials to prompt people on the kind of things that might need to be in place. Including:

[An Engagement Planning Checklist](#)

[A Comms and Dissemination Plan](#)

[A spreadsheet for capturing what was learnt from conversations](#)

We later asked participants to think through what engagement activities would look like in practice, in particular:

- What conversation starters will you use?
- Getting the story straight - what will you be telling people you're doing?
- What does the area you're engaging in look like? How have you made it friendly, welcoming and inclusive?

We also gave each group a potential challenge that might arise and asked them to think about how they would respond. For example:

*A local resident starts angrily asking you why you're bothering to do this as it's a waste of money and nothing will change anyway. What do you do?*

A listening exercise was run in pairs, with one person talking about a random topic and the other listening. Afterwards, we asked partners to reflect on what behaviours made it more comfortable to talk and reflected as a whole group on how these behaviours could be carried over into public engagement and how we'd deal with someone saying things we disagreed with.

Ahead of the workshop we created two Learning and Reflection forms so that immediately after activities, those running them could capture information about how well or not the prototype had worked. One template was for personal reflections and one for capturing team debriefs. At the end of the workshop we encouraged participants to use these forms as a way to reflect on today's session, to get people used to using these.

[Personal learning and reflections form](#)

[Team debrief learning and reflections form](#)

We finished by asking people what difference they thought Calderdale Conversations would make, and to share their hopes and fears now they were at the

end of the session. The council team also gave a presentation on what would be happening next and reiterated the need for staff to come forward to make these conversations happen. We also asked people during the day to note any gaps that still needed filling before Calderdale Conversations could start, and any remaining learning needs.

You can access our [workshop facilitation notes here](#).

## Outcomes

Through the course of providing this training we also learnt more about people's hopes and fears about Calderdale Conversations, and about the training process.

At the start of these session

<p>Hopes included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Feel comfortable engaging with the public"</li> <li>• "Hope to learn new techniques to interact with people. How to deal with difficult conversations."</li> <li>• "Some drive and momentum to agree what we are going to talk about"</li> <li>• "Better direction from leadership. Change in CMBC. Not just one of these things that happens."</li> <li>• 'Council will recognise the need for better co-ordination at consultation'</li> <li>• "I hope I come away with an idea of what I will be doing and how this project fits into my work plan!"</li> </ul>	<p>Fears included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Lack of prior knowledge about what training would deliver"</li> <li>• "Hope it's not a tokenistic exercise"</li> <li>• "I come out of this session not having a plan on how I will be working on this project"</li> <li>• "No follow up to the training"</li> <li>• "Will results be representative of Calderdale?"</li> <li>• "Going over old ground again"</li> <li>• "A rehash of old ideas. Not listened to."</li> <li>• "We don't end up with enough people willing to follow through into the engagement activities"</li> <li>• "That people won't buy in and will be cynical/negative"</li> <li>• "People will want too much certainty"</li> <li>• "Losing momentum after year 1"</li> </ul>
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We also head about some concerns going into Calderdale Conversations, including:

- Whether there would be enough resource to deliver these engagement activities,
- How what is heard through Calderdale Conversations would be collated and fed back to the public?

- Whether there would be a clear enough strategy and coordination of this work within the council, including clear internal communications?
- Would Calderdale Conversations be sustainable and whether staff would have permission to take risks?
- How would volunteers be supported if they were involved in potentially challenging conversations and given a chance to debrief afterwards?

A [full write up of results, including feedback is available here.](#)

## **Feedback**

People valued the chance to think things through together in small groups, working across departments and found the templates useful. However, there was also a concern about the volume of paperwork, and that this would be excessive for some engagement activities.

For some people the content was already familiar. It was suggested that a tiered approach might have been better, giving people the opportunity to choose the level appropriate for them. There were some very experienced practitioners in the room so in some cases they were being taught things they already knew and could have instead just had a more practical introduction to using prototypes. There could have then been further training for those particularly new to engagement.

Participants said they would take away the planning templates, the need to think carefully about purpose and audience, and the importance of active listening. One person highlighted involving councillors as a currently untapped opportunity. While some people highlighted concerns about a need for clearer purpose and strategy. One person wrote: "This is in its early stage - Don't overthink it - try things and just go for it."

### 3) Testing the Prototypes in Practice

Once this co-design stage was complete, Public Square's involvement became more observational - as the Council promoted Calderdale Conversations internally, and encouraged staff to sign up for making these conversations happen.

Activities from the council included:

- Allocating a member of staff to take on chasing up and encouraging staff to take part
- Developing prototypes and branding, including t-shirts.
- Creating a guide for volunteers (largely within staff, though also some council partners) for using these, including checking the engagement calendar which they created on their intranet and signing up for activities and how to book out prototypes.
- Creating a guide for using the prototypes. You can [access the full version here](#) (we've included an extract below).

#### How the prototypes were used and what impact there has been

By the end of 2019 there had been about 20 events using the prototypes developed for Calderdale Conversations. What the council learnt from these conversations has been captured internally, but hasn't currently been shared publicly.

#### 'Calderdale Conversation' events

Calderdale Council has been engaged in events across the borough and has run events in every township of the borough and in most wards, with between 100 and 200 people engaged in total. These have included events at libraries, dementia groups, community halls and other locations.

#### Website

The website has been launched and, as stated above, includes details of the events planned or carried out, as well as information to help people looking to get involved in Calderdale Conversations. You can see the site at:

<https://www.calderdale.gov.uk/v2/council/our-vision/calderdale-conversations>

#### Interest and engagement

Council staff involved in Calderdale Conversations report that they are pleased with how the programme is going and that it is beginning to become 'a bit of a movement'.

*“A few weeks ago we were contacted by someone from the deaf community about being involved. We are now speaking to them about the best way to engage with them in general as well as hearing their priorities.”*

The findings from Calderdale Conversations will go to cabinet as a public document, on the 13th of January 2020.

## Staff engagement

The council reports that staff are interested in and engaging in the prototypes - and are exploring how they can work for them. Similarly, there is interest in exploring the options for future digital interaction, even if at this time the website is used as a relatively simple shop window. Options might include making data from the engagement available to the public - and the team will explore this and other options in the near future. In fact, the team is looking at recruiting a member of staff to manage the online content and in how this content can be kept sustained throughout the development of Calderdale Conversations.

Partners from outside the council have also been involved in some of these conversations. The initial trail of the listening sofa involved partners from a neighbourhoods partnership. At this stage they haven't however involved volunteers from the wider community, which was initially an ambition.

## Training

Following from our training workshop, the staff development team (who attended) have developed and delivered a practical training course twice more and have trained 28 people. The Council now has a register of 50-60 staff members who've benefited from the training.

## A continuing engagement

There is no endpoint for the Calderdale Conversations engagement. As a result, in some way this has been a rebadging of their engagement work - and has acted to encourage the Council to think about engagement differently. It is unclear what this change will look like in the longer term, but staff working on this in the council have a shared ambition that every officer should have an expectation of listening and talking the public as part of their role.

There has been some concern from councillors that this approach has been taken instead of running a bigger-scale and more focussed conversation about priorities that could feed into budget.

This first stage has been a conversation about priorities in general, and a more open conversation. Next these approaches will be used for specific topics including culture

and climate change. It is hoped that this will result in different conversations with a different people that would have happened otherwise.

## Evaluation of the prototypes

We have encouraged council staff to reflect on how effective or not the prototypes have been. (The Learning and Reflections form we created for this is shared above.)

Whilst fewer reflections were gathered than anticipated, some of the things we heard were that the sofa helped people feel 'on a level' with the council and kept things informal. And that it helped start conversations because it was something different and out of the ordinary. You can see [initial reflections from the first trial of the listening sofa here](#).

We hope the council team will encourage people to capture more learning and reflections in the future and will be able to draw out more knowledge from those who've already trialled prototypes.



An image of a Calderdale Conversation t-shirt and a cushion used for the listening sofa resting on the voting slots.

## 4) What We've Learned Through The Process as a Whole

Towards the end of the first year we spoke with the council's project team and asked them for their reflections on this process as a whole, and of being involved in Public Square. They said that Public Square had been useful in bringing outside advisors, particularly being able to talk through digital possibilities. They also felt that the project encouraged them to think about this process of engagement harder than they would have otherwise and encouraged them to take a different approach.

We have also reflected as the Public Square team on some of the points of learning that stood out from this project, beyond an evaluation of the prototypes themselves. Key reflections are captured in the boxes below.

### **Embracing open-ended conversations is a challenge. Having enough time to reach shared understanding and ambition is crucial.**

Our initial brief was expressed as a very broad ambition, with work needed to establish a clearer picture. Within these broad aims some different points of focus emerged:

- On the one hand there was a desire to discuss residents' priorities for the future which, amongst other things, could inform future budget decisions.
- In potential tension with this was the idea of having more open-ended conversations with residents, in which residents, rather than the council, would inform which direction the conversation took.
- There was interest in more directly looking at how residents could be supported to play a greater role in shaping Calderdale in partnership with the council.

It was a challenge to resolve these tensions, with wariness in some parts of the council to embracing a more open-ended approach. This included worry that the council would not have the capacity to respond to what was heard.

Being open to emergent directions does not remove the need for thinking carefully about how to build such a conversation and being adequately prepared to respond. In many ways it places increased needs on an engagement.

It may well have been productive to have explored these concerns about open-ended conversations at greater length at an early stage in the process. This would have allowed for a conversation about how to prepare for some of the challenges that come with this way of working – including setting realistic expectations as part



of such engagement. This could have helped draw up a clearer shared vision for Calderdale Conversations.

One barrier that stood in the way of this was the upcoming period of purdah, which our activities had to be fitted around, and meant we moved into the co-design phase faster than we might otherwise have done. On any project there is always a period of relationship building, and councils have many different stakeholders to involve. There was little time for negotiating this before the project needed to move forward.

### **Local authorities are complex organisations with many internal as well as external stakeholders. Focussing on this is key to achieving change.**

Councils are complex organisations embedded in wider systems of local democracy, rather than the monolithic institutions of public imagination. In these complex organisations are different attitudes, outlooks, interests and relationships – many of which face significant pressure from falling income and rising challenges.

Encouraging change within councils, therefore, requires significant commitment, sensitivity and compassion. And it requires us to think carefully about how best to support those people in organisations who can build change to do so amidst the pressures they and their colleagues face. A key question for anyone trying to build change in local government is how to best work with this reality.

While we were sensitive to this challenge it was one focus among many. This challenge is one that needs greater recognition amongst all those pushing for change.

One way in which austerity has added to this challenge is by the loss of roles focussed on providing coordination and strategy for engagement within councils. Not having someone with this overarching focus within the council added to some of the challenges of this project, and the need for greater coordination of engagement was an issue regularly raised by staff.

### **It's vital to manage expectations in an age of austerity**

Given the well-recognised constraints on funding for local authorities, it is not surprising that councils are often grateful for professional support in their work. In an age of austerity, local councils may be tempted to see support from organisations like Demsoc and mySociety as a way of addressing immediate need or, in some cases, filling in resource.

We were able to prevent this pitfall in our work with Calderdale, because our engagement was always designed, and labelled, to concentrate on facilitating local

authority, partner and citizens to engage together. Where there was delivery to do this, it was always understood that the Council, its partners and – in some cases – residents would be doing it.

However, there is still a predicament, even for this kind of engagement – largely because while it creates the space and time to think and develop new models of engagement, there may not always be the resources to support it once that thinking has taken place. We were able to explore these conversations as part of this project and thought about how our involvement could best add value, though there is more still that could have been done.

## **The challenge of maximising impact amid budgetary constraints**

A strength of our involvement with Calderdale was that this focussed on providing space for reflection and support for building changed ways of working, rather than becoming a temporary stopgap. Nonetheless there were ways to strengthen this further, and points that it's important to emphasise for working in this context:

- As mentioned above, more time could have been spent earlier to establishing a clearer vision for Calderdale Conversations and working through some anxieties around a more open-ended response.
- Another area for improvement was managing the workload required of council staff. At times, our involvement added to the workload of staff who were regularly checking in with us and building this project internally within the council. We believe that at times we could have given a clearer picture of expectations from us earlier on and thought more about how to limit this load and use our time most constructively.
- We often heard concerns about the capacity of staff to deliver engagement activities as part of Calderdale Conversations. There was also concern that the onus might fall more on some people than others – neighbourhoods teams often pick up much of this work within councils. Our work thought carefully about how to enable wider council staff to deliver conversations alongside other work. Nonetheless negotiating these realities is an important, and sensitive, part of working with councils. Having these conversations upfront is really important.
- Achieving improved participation is not just about reaching further. It's about building trust through delivering on the expectations that are set out. It's important that this gets at least as much focus as thinking about how to reach more people. Arguably we could have done more to give this attention within our work. Doing so could have helped ease some of the anxieties we encountered about a more open-ended process of listening. There is always a risk of this aspect not receiving adequate focus in discussions of improved engagement. We could have also spent longer

early on to explore current practice and to build more closely upon what was already in place.

- There is a real risk that comes with arriving in pressured councils with resources, particularly when there is openness about how these will be spent. Inevitably there is excitement around this, and a risk that this can raise expectations that are not deliverable, or that will not be sustainable beyond your departure. While we were wary of this danger there is probably more we could have done, and this is an important risk to be vigilant of.

Some of the shortcomings identified for this project are very demanding to overcome. It would be unfair to suggest that all of this could have been covered fully within this project's scope. Instead it might be more helpful to think of some of these as a checklist that need exploring with councils in order to think about how best to add to systems of local democracy.

### **There is a risk of digital being treated as 'a thing'**

As with other councils, learning about the available digital tools and what they might be useful for takes a significant amount of effort. It took some time to work through the perception of digital as a separate 'thing', rather than a means to achieving an end. This came up working with council officers as well as amongst residents in the enthusiasm for 'an app' as one of the prototypes to be developed.

It's important that digital tools can be positioned as one aspect of a designing a functioning process of engagement, not as a separate thing.

### **Using co-design for open-ended processes is a sensitive task**

Calderdale Conversations was planned as an open-ended engagement exercise. It can be a challenge to communicate something like this, and to involve a wider group in its design. Citizen participation and engagement is already an inherently abstract topic to think about.

It's important to think about how different groups can best be brought into the design process for topics like this, while being sensitive to the risk of closing down the agenda. It's not just councils who are under time pressure, and the involvement of other groups must always have to take account of what demands are being placed on participants and what rewards and recognition are available for them.

Co-design has a lot to add to the design process but requires careful consideration. Achieving this at pace whilst working as a newly formed team both between the project partners and with our council partners was a difficult challenge.

## **Creating opportunities for reflection and appetite for building a new kind of relationship**

The programme and our involvement appear to have helped to build an appetite for Calderdale staff to have a new kind of open-ended conversation with residents.

We heard feedback that our work helped build space for reflecting on how engagement is working and thinking in depth about how to go further. And that Public Square encouraged the council to work in a different way than they otherwise would have.

Participants at our events often fed back that they valued coming together with a wide range of people - either within, or beyond, the council – and working together on the task of improving engagement. The project also helped create a palpable energy – best summed up by the members of the neighbourhoods partnership who had set up a trial of the listening sofa before the workshop they were in had even finished.

The project helped spark reflection on how engagement is currently coordinated within the council and how practice is shared. It has also helped build momentum behind exploring, and learning from, new approaches and opportunities.

Hopefully this has sparked conversations that will continue about how to share practice across the organisation, how to coordinate engagement, how to engage in a more open-ended way, and how to work in partnership with partners and the wider community. These conversations aren't wholly new, but the project has helped put impetus behind them. While there was a limit to how much data council staff gathered within the early stage of Calderdale Conversations, hopefully the emphasis on evaluation and iteration will be an important part of these developments. In a time of intense pressure interventions like Public Square can help keep create room for such reflection and motivation.