



REPORT SUMMARY

THE VALUE OF EARLY ENGAGEMENT IN PLANNING

Evidence of the benefits of early engagement in land use planning decisions

June 2020

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Why is this research needed?

Better community engagement is an established aim of ongoing Scottish planning and land reform policy. The Land Commission's workstream on land use decision-making provides practical advice on how landowners, land managers and communities can work together to make better – and fairer – decisions about land use. Using the Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement (LRRS) as a framework sets out how good practice for community engagement in decisions about land. In the development context, significant land use change is regulated through the planning system which sets out what is expected of development in terms of wider consultation and engagement.

The purpose of this research is to demonstrate the value of early conversations with communities about significant land use changes. The intention has been to understand the real and tangible benefits of meaningful engagement early in the planning and development process – not just what those benefits might be in theory, but what they actually are in practice. Looking more closely at examples within this context could provide useful learning for managing land use change beyond the planning system.

In response to well-documented community concerns about their influence on the planning process, negative attitudes towards development and the often combative nature of the planning system (see full report), the Scottish Government has stated that early engagement can lead to developments having a smoother journey through the planning process¹ and help build trust between, and secure better outcomes for, communities and landowners².

What evidence is there for these statements?

Based on discussions with over 40 representatives from across the development industry, this research report provides tangible evidence about the practical benefits of early engagement for developers and landowners. It provides valuable information to support implementation of the community engagement aspects of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, and offers useful learning for managing land use change beyond the planning system.

This report:

1. **Challenges sceptical attitudes** towards early engagement with credible evidence from the development industry.

¹ Scottish Government, 2017a. Places, people and planning: consultation on the future of the Scottish planning system. [pdf] Available at: <<https://www.gov.scot/publications/places-people-planning-consultation-future-scottish-planning-system/>> [accessed 25 March 2020].

² Scottish Government, 2017b. Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement. [pdf] Available at: <<https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement/>> [accessed 25 March 2020].

2. Shares **evidence from developers** of the benefits of early engagement, including how to engage to generate those benefits.
3. **Provides insights** into the costs of early engagement.
4. Suggests a **framework for collaborative early engagement** which is practical, positive and deliverable, in order to inform future advice and guidance.

1.2 How was the research carried out?

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 44 developers, landowners, consultants and others involved in planning and development. The quotes in this summary and the full report have been anonymised for confidentiality. Eleven case studies were generated, all of which can be found in the full report.

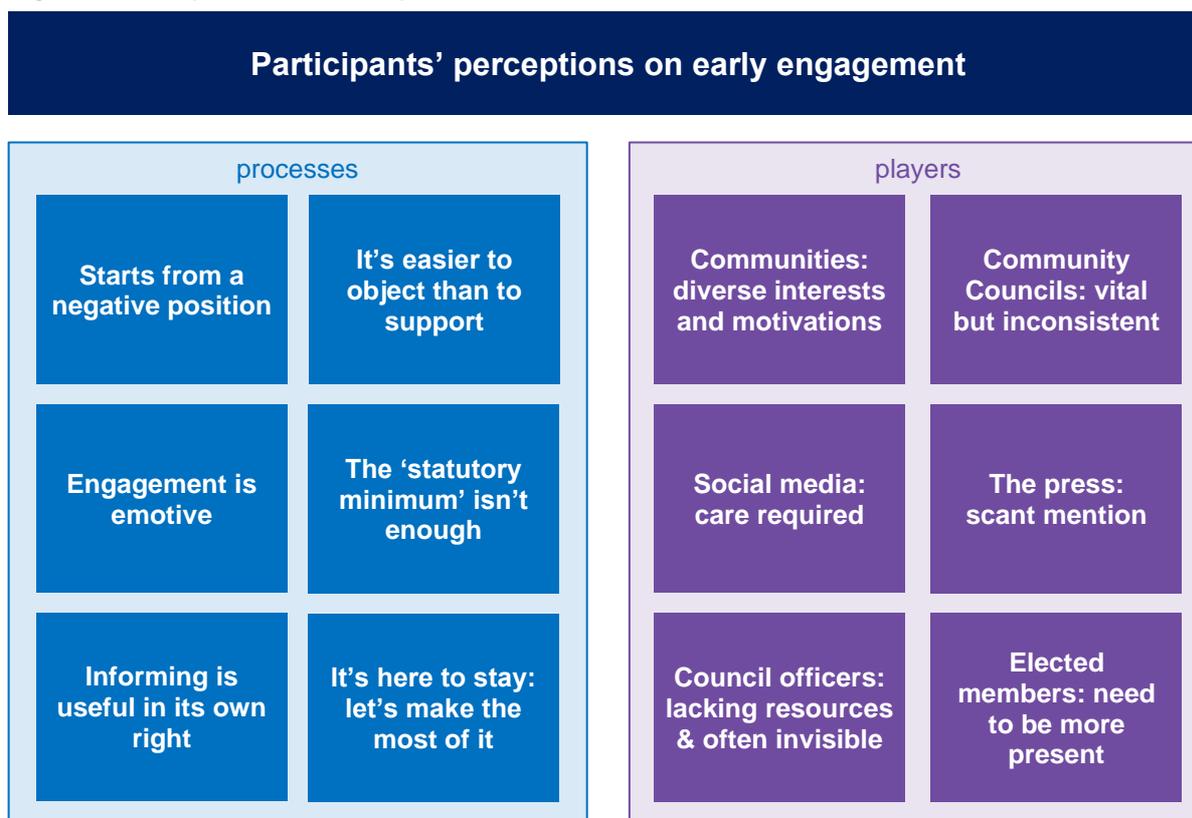
The full report also contains a policy and literature review, an explanation of current opportunities for early engagement in planning, and a thorough summary of current advice and guidance for early engagement in relation to planning, land use and community empowerment.

2 DEVELOPMENT INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Perceptions on current practice

Based on the interviews, the report describes how early engagement works at the moment from the perspective of the development industry. The key points are shown in Figure 1. Much more detail is contained in the report, including examples and analysis for each point.

Figure 1: Perceptions on current practice



2.2 What does good engagement look like?

A common theme from those interviewed was that the quality of engagement is essential to its success. Analysis of research participants' experience of good engagement revealed ten essential characteristics from a development industry perspective (see Figure 2).

The full report contains examples and additional information about each of these ten essential characteristics.

Figure 2: What does good engagement look like?

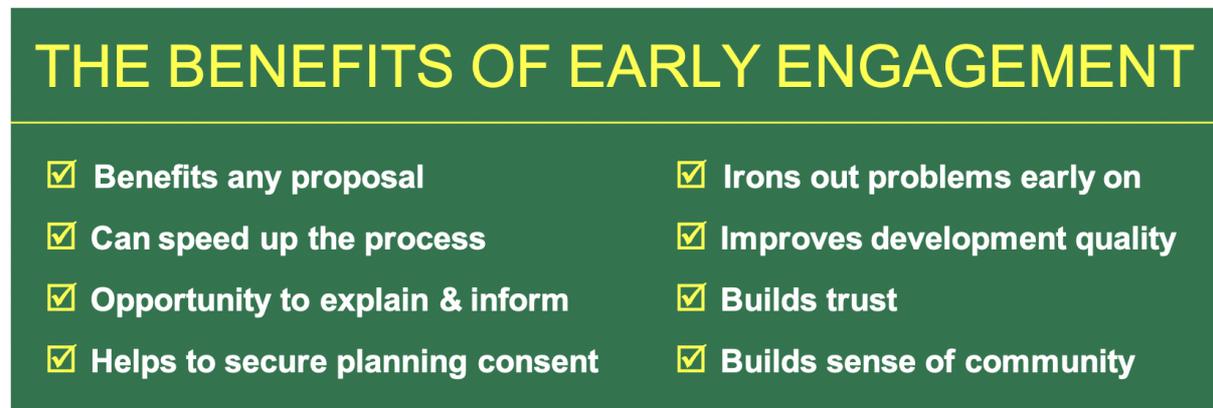


3 THE BENEFITS OF EARLY ENGAGEMENT

During the research, developers, landowners and their consultants explained that early engagement can deliver important benefits – for any scale of application, location, developer or type of development.

Analysis of the responses revealed eight key benefits (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The benefits of early engagement



Examples and analysis of each key benefit can be found in the full report, along with full-page case studies. The main points are, in summary:

- 1 **Early engagement can benefit any proposal:** This point was made by almost every research participant.
- 2 **It can speed up the planning process (but not always):** Development industry participants were broadly split 50/50 as to whether early engagement speeded up the planning process – but they all agreed that it can help avoid time-consuming delays or controversies once a planning application has been submitted.
- 3 **It is an opportunity to explain proposals and inform communities:** Early engagement enables developers to get their message across about the benefits that their development intends to deliver, and later about development progress and community building. This includes communicating how development proposals support delivery of national and local public policy.

- 4 **It helps to secure planning consent:** Almost every research participant, from the very small to the very large, suggested that early engagement helps to de-risk the development process, primarily by reducing objections.
- 5 **It irons out problems early on:** Over half of research participants explained how early community engagement has helped them resolve problems at an early stage in the process, perhaps things they didn't know about, before they get too big and expensive to fix.
- 6 **It improves the quality of development:** Around three-quarters of research participants, and all developers involved with large scale urban regeneration projects or urban extensions, highlighted how early engagement provides an opportunity to improve placemaking and design aspects of projects. Examples demonstrate how improvements can vary from the relatively minor to substantial changes with major benefits.
- 7 **It builds trust:** The majority of research participants – covering all sizes, sectors and types of organisation – referred to an important positive outcome of early engagement being to build relationships and trust with communities. This is important, because previous Scottish Government research has identified lack of trust as one of the fundamental barriers to community engagement in planning.

Winchburgh: building long term community relationships

The Winchburgh project is a substantial extension to a small existing settlement in West Lothian. It has been in progress since submission of the initial planning application in 2005 and commencement on site with enabling infrastructure in 2012, and throughout that time the lead developer has put great emphasis on community engagement.

In terms of construction of infrastructure, facilities and housing, the project is now on phase 2 of 4. Over 500 of the projected 3,900 homes are occupied. The **community has played an active part** in planning future phases and community facilities like schools and a park, as the examples below illustrate.

Engaging on park design: The park is a good example of the effect of community involvement. It is located on a former landfill site. Originally the masterplan proposed that the landfill site would be remediated and set out as an informal open space suitable for dog walking etc. But after community engagement it was decided to upgrade the open space to a formal park. Engagement covered planning, design and construction. The park was linked to the housing development by a Section 75 agreement, enabling the park to be created before work started on the housing.

Different engagement approaches: The developer uses a range of engagement approaches from informal one to one discussions to presentations in packed halls. Rather than deliver a message cold to an uninformed audience, these follow more informal early meetings and other engagements to share and work up development ideas. By the time of Pre-Application Consultation, most issues have been addressed and the community is usually supportive of proposals.

These big presentations have now become annual events, providing an opportunity for the developer to update on progress and outline proposals for the forthcoming year.

Bringing communities together: The developer is conscious that the priorities of new residents may be different from those in the original village. The developer's community consultant has spent much time working with the groups in the original village, some of whom are older.

This led, for example, to a call for more 'cottage' housing for older people like the workers' terraced cottages in the existing village. In response, proposals were brought forward for affordable bungalows designed for older people to live on a single level.

Place ambassadors: Part of the community consultant's role is to manage emotions and keep people informed. As the development population increases it is logistically challenging to keep everyone informed.

One successful approach has been that a number of residents are now acting informally as 'Winchburgh Ambassadors'. They have a two-way role, to communicate information to the community as well as relay information back to the developer about areas of concern or where there is community support. For more information, please visit [Winchburgh Developments Ltd website](#).



Image: Local school pupils who helped design the park returning to the site to check on progress. They are also members of the Winchburgh Ambassadors programme.

- 8 **It builds a sense of community:** The positive impacts of using engagement to build and sustain communities were raised by around a quarter of developers, from major long-term urban extensions to regeneration projects. The common message is that early engagement has benefits in building and empowering communities which extend far beyond the physical development proposed in the project. The Winchburgh case study is an example of that. Ten other case studies are contained in the full report.

4 THE COSTS OF EARLY ENGAGEMENT

One of the aims of the research was to establish the costs of early engagement. From participant responses, it was clear that those who undertake early engagement do not routinely keep a record of the costs of early engagement. Only one developer kept a budget line specifically for engagement.

Our analysis of respondents' estimated figures for early engagement therefore comes with a huge health warning – that they are very much estimates:

- 1 Typical costs for a Pre-Application Consultation on a Major planning application lay within the range £20k-£50k, with most at the lower end of that scale.
- 2 Most respondents said that the scale of a development proposal had little impact on the cost of Pre-Application Consultation. The duration of a project does, however, make a difference. For example, a new community or urban extension being phased over a decade or more could have an annual budget over £100k for engagement related to design proposals and community building.
- 3 Pre-Application Consultation costs appear to represent around 5%-10% of planning application costs; this can be a substantial figure on a large project. In terms of Gross Development Value (GDV), the figures from research participants suggest spending on early engagement of up to around 0.3% of GDV on residential projects and considerably less on commercial projects.

What is important to note is that the private sector will assess the benefit (in terms of financial value or worth) in investing in community engagement to gain a planning consent. Even a substantial six or seven figure investment can be worthwhile if it generates sufficient income over the long term.

Whatever the costs of engaging early, this large developer clearly explains the potential costs of not engaging well at an early stage. The full report contains more information on the costs of early engagement, including relating to charrettes.

5 A NEW COLLABORATIVE FRAMEWORK

This research study has revealed good examples of early engagement in the development process (see section 2 above) and credible evidence of their benefits (section 3). What is missing is a planning system that encourages and incentivises good engagement so that good early engagement becomes the norm, so Scotland can reap the benefits.

The ongoing planning reforms create an opportunity to rectify this situation. The Scottish Government is currently preparing secondary legislation and guidance following the Planning (Scotland) Action 2019. The report therefore takes the opportunity to propose a collaborative framework for early engagement, involving developers and landowners working together with planning authorities and of course communities. The framework is intended to be a practical, positive and deliverable response to this report's evidence, and complements ongoing planning reforms and the Scottish Government's [Place Principle](#).

The main elements of the proposed framework are:

1 **Pre-Application Consultation should happen much earlier**

Pre-Application Consultation is too late: that was the widespread conclusion of research participants. Most remarked that it should effectively be brought forward to the much earlier planning policy stage – where Local Development Plans (and in the future Local Place Plans)

set the vision and policy for communities. Where the principle of development is established in the Local Development Plan, it should be not be revisited through community engagement at the planning application (or current Pre-Application Consultation) stage.

There is nothing new in this: it is a central tenet of planning reform. What is significant is that developers and landowners are promoting it and see the benefits.

2 'National Standards for Community Engagement in Planning'

New guidance should be developed for all developments, to encourage early engagement and give a clear framework for the development industry, local authorities and communities to collaborate and engage well.

New guidance should emphasise that early engagement must be bespoke rather than the tick-box mentality which is so criticised by research participants. We therefore suggest that it be based on principles, rather like the existing [National Standards for Community Engagement](#) and [PAS SP=EED](#) guide to community engagement in planning. Indeed, much of the necessary content is already contained in these two documents, which should form the starting point for new National Standards for Community Engagement in Planning.

The full report contains a number of specific pointers for the content of these new National Standards.

3 Large-scale developments

Engagement should not wait until the current Pre-Application Consultation but start at the planning policy stage – before site acquisition – and form part of the evidence gathering process. Engagement should be a regular occurrence throughout each stage of the process, from site selection to master-planning, consenting, construction and community-building.

4 Informing

Keeping communities informed is vital, from the Local Development Plan stage onwards, to enable people to make informed judgments about the future of their place. This includes information about public policy objectives as well as development proposals.

5 Collaboration

Engagement should be seen as a collaborative endeavour for sites allocated in the Local Development Plan. Local authorities, developers and communities should work together to deliver the Local Development Plan and also, therefore, national public policy objectives like the climate emergency, health and wellbeing, and inclusive growth.

This will involve training and standards for different players to support them to deliver their roles: Councillors, Community Councillors, public officials, developers, landowners and their supporting teams.

6 Resources

Implementing this new framework will of course need resources. A potential opportunity would be to share and reinvest some of the uplift in land values generated from changing use/development. Land value capture mechanisms could offer a way of thinking about this.

The recommendations suggest an entirely practical framework for collaboration that could make an important contribution, supported by the evidence in the full report, to give confidence that the development industry itself sees benefits in early engagement, and that many within the industry would support a greater emphasis on early engagement – provided that it is workable and effective.

AUTHORS

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