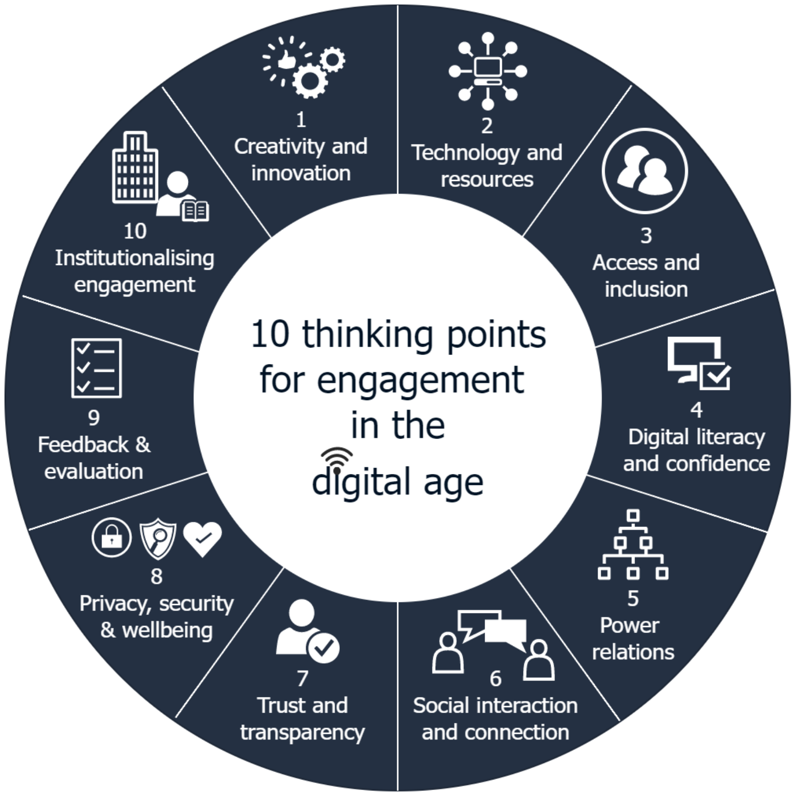
Engagement in the digital age: practitioners' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for planning and environmental decision-making



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Abstract

Effective engagement is crucial for making better quality decisions for more sustainable, equitable, and resilient outcomes. The involvement of members of the public and other stakeholder groups has been increasingly promoted in research, policy, and practice from local to international scales. However, whether engagement achieves its goals is highly variable between different social and institutional contexts. In the digital age, there are still many unanswered questions regarding the benefits of digital tools and their effectiveness at addressing the goals of engagement. These questions became increasingly urgent during the COVID-19 pandemic which placed technology-related disparities into the spotlight. This thesis explored practitioners' perspectives of the challenges and opportunities for public and stakeholder engagement in the digital age, focusing on planning and environmental decision-making processes in the UK. The research was interdisciplinary, participatory and action-oriented, driven by an impact goal and co-produced with practitioners to produce relevant and useful outcomes for policy and practice. This approach was agile and adaptive in responding to the needs of potential users and beneficiaries of the research.

The research followed a mixed-methods approach involving a survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews with practitioners in UK public, private, and third sectors organisations. The findings revealed a comprehensive range of technical and ethical debates around the use of digital tools for engagement and inclusion, digital literacy, power relations, social interaction and connection, trust and transparency, digital well-being, privacy and security, among other issues. Challenging attitudes of 'digital by default' and 'digital first', the findings demonstrated that there is no single digital, in-person, or hybrid approach which guarantees successful engagement in all situations. The research also responded to a gap in the evidence on the institutionalisation of engagement practices, delivering novel insights into the barriers and enablers for undertaking engagement across a range of different organisational settings from a practitioner perspective. This included considering a range of organisational constraints including available resources, skills and expertise, participant expectations, and practitioner agency. This research revealed that many of these issues are rooted in the cultures and governance structures of organisations and therefore may require a culture change to be successful in the long term. Overall, the findings support and contribute original and evidence-based insights to existing theories and frameworks understanding what works for engagement, including factors that are uniquely important for digital engagement. 10 thinking points for effective engagement in the digital age are suggested for policy and practice which can be used to enhance existing guidelines, models, and toolkits for effective engagement in an increasingly digitised world.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Patricia Hafferty,

and to my mother, Stephanie Hafferty.

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Author’s declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University, stakeholders, and/or any other collaborating organisations.

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Signed: Caitlin M. A. Hafferty Date: 20.11.2022

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Glossary

Public and/or stakeholder participation: a broad, umbrella term which defines any way (e.g., a participatory process, method, or approach) that the public or other stakeholder individuals, groups, and/or organisations are involved with decisions that affect their lives. This can include, for example: 'the practice of consulting and involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy-forming activities of organisations and institutions responsible for policy development' (Rowe and Frewer, 2004 p. 512).

Public and/or stakeholder engagement: a more specific term which can be used to describe the formal process (e.g., a process led by organisations) by which public and stakeholder individuals, groups, and/or organisations are involved in decisions that affect their lives. Public and stakeholder engagement is a term that is widely used in a variety of sectors including health, education, arts, heritage, science, policy, planning and local government. In some sectors, it has a precise definition, but in others it is used more flexibly.

'Effective' engagement: in this thesis, effectiveness is defined as an engagement process that is successful in producing a desired or intended result (i.e., achieving the intended goals and benefits of engagement). This includes professional or organisational procedures**,** methods, techniques, or approaches that are considered to be most effective. Effective standards (often referred to as 'best practice' in research, policy, and practice) can also be used for self-assessment or benchmarking. What effectiveness looks like will depend on the context in which engagement is implemented.

Stakeholders: a term used to describe groups and individuals who can affect, or could be affected by, a decision – i.e., they have a *stake* in the process. Stakeholders can include members of the public and other stakeholder groups, such as local authorities, charities, and other key organisations.

Members of the public or 'publics': a broad term to describe anyone who is (or could be) involved in a decision or decision-making process. 'The public' can include national publics, citizens, non-citizens, local communities, and so forth.

Practitioners: refers to those who are involved in carrying out engagement in their profession or discipline (including researchers. This term is considered to be inclusive of practice-enablers and, for clarity, practitioners and practice-enablers are often referred to collectively as 'practitioners' in this thesis unless otherwise specified. Practitioners and practice-enablers who are responsible for carrying out engagement are also referred to as 'engagers'.

Practice-enablers: those who work to share, reinforce, and/or expand the work and impact of practitioners. For example, practice-enablers can be understood as staff who are more strategically involved in engagement (e.g., improving engagement practices at an organisational level) rather than responsible for delivering engagement on-the-ground.

Organisation: an organised group of people working together in pursuit of common goals or objectives, such as a business or government department. Organisations can exist to make a profit, to provide a service to members or the wider community, to deliver knowledge, and so forth. Organisations can include institutions and this thesis uses both terms.

Institution: a type of organisation which is founded for a particular educational, religious, professional, or social purpose. Therefore, all institutions are organisations, but not all organisations are institutions. The term institution is commonly used to describe an organisation which is set up to deliver knowledge, such as an academic institution.

Institutionalisation: 'The process by which organisations (including institutions) and procedures acquire value and stability' (Huntington 1968: 12; brackets added for clarification). In this thesis, institutionalisation is understood as the embedding of principles and practices of participation into existing governance and decision-making structures in such a way that they become a norm. This can require an organisational culture change.

Organisational culture: 'normal' accepted understandings/behaviours in the organisation, including common values and principles. In this thesis, the organisational culture is understood to facilitate and/or inhibit effective strategies for engagement.

Organisational culture change: the process by which an organisation's culture and environment is changed by altering the vision, values, mission, goals, processes, roles, and/or practices. Culture change may be necessary to better align the behaviours of employees with current and future organisational objectives, such as the embedding of engagement.

Organisational learning: organisational learning is the process by which the organisation constantly questions existing knowledge, products, processes, systems, strategic positions, and applies various modes of learning to achieve a sustained change or competitive advantage.

Digital (remote) engagement: engagement that is carried out using digital tools, methods, and/or approaches. Digital tools for engagement can be used both in-person and remotely. In this thesis, 'digital and remote engagement' is used to describe an engagement process that is carried out using digital technologies (which can be online or offline), can be conducted in real time (synchronously) or at different times (asynchronously), and is conducted remotely (i.e., virtually as opposed to physically in-person).

In-person engagement: engagement that is carried out in a physical and in-person environment as opposed to a virtual (digital and remote) environment. Digital tools can be used in-person through hybrid and/or digitally mediated/enabled approaches.

Hybrid engagement: engagement that is conducted using both digital (online) and in-person (physical) methods, tools, and approaches. Hybrid engagement can be conducted in different ways, for example: synchronously and in real time to include both in-person and virtual participants (e.g., using a blend of digital/remote and in-person methods at the same time); asynchronously to include both in-person and virtual participants at different types in the engagement process (e.g., using in-person methods to follow-up an initial digital/remote engagement).

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is concerned with investigating practitioners' perspectives of the challenges and opportunities for public and stakeholder engagement in the digital age, focusing on planning and environmental decision-making processes in the UK. Specifically, this thesis focuses on the effectiveness of digital (remote) tools for engagement and the dynamics of institutionalising effective strategies. *Engagement* is defined after Reed (2008) as: a process whereby individuals, groups, and/or organisations can choose to take an active role in decisions which affect them (the Glossary provides a full list of the researcher's interpretation of key terms in this thesis). This thesis aims to understand practitioners' perspectives (i.e., those responsible for carrying out engagement), rather than public and stakeholder views, to meet a current research gap. This introductory chapter first provides a problem statement, impact goals, and an overview of the potential interest groups and beneficiaries of the research (section 1.1). It then provides the background and context to the research and justifies the need for the research by identifying gaps in the existing literature (section 1.2). The research aims and questions are included in section 1.3, including a summary of the research methods and approach. Section 1.4 provides an overview of the structure of the thesis and section 1.5 includes a note on presentation and style.

1.1 Problem statement and impact goal

Effective engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes is key for better quality decisions for more sustainable, resilient, and equitable outcomes. As such, the involvement of members of the public and other stakeholder groups (e.g., local authorities, businesses, charities) has been increasingly advocated and embedded in research, policy, and practice from local to international scales. However, whether or not engagement achieves its goals is highly variable and there is the potential to cause unintended negative consequences including the (further) exclusion, marginalisation, and disempowerment of participants. This is particularly important in the wake of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic which placed technology-related disparities in the spotlight and raised important questions regarding the effectiveness of delivering effective engagement in digital and remote settings. To be successful in the long-term, any engagement process needs to be institutionalised (the process by which organisations and institutions acquire value and stability, where principles and practices for engagement are embedded into existing governance and decision-making structures in such a way that they become a norm; see the Glossary) to deliver transformative change and more effective, inclusive, and meaningful outcomes. It is therefore essential to understand how different engagement processes, methods, tools, and approaches are fit for purpose by understanding how different contextual factors and organisational settings influence the outcomes of engagement. Upon examination of the existing literature in research and practice, the policy landscape (a number of policy and practice hooks are identified in section 1.2), and consideration of the needs and priorities of interest groups and potential users/beneficiaries of the research (stakeholder engagement is discussed later in this section), the overall research aim of this study was to:

> **Research aim:** Understand practitioners' perspectives of what works for effective public and stakeholder engagement in the digital age, focusing on planning and environmental decision-making processes in a UK context.

The central research aim was delivered by addressing three research questions which are identified in section 1.3. A key term in the above research aim, and the below impact goal, is 'effective'. In this context, effectiveness is defined as an engagement process that is successful in producing a desired or intended result (i.e., achieving the intended goals and benefits of engagement). It is important to be clear that 'effective' engagement strategies are not understood in this thesis as the 'correct' or 'only' way to conduct engagement, and what effectiveness looks like will vary depending on organisational structures and other contextual factors (the term 'best practice' is not used to move away from assumptions that there is a 'gold standard' or 'one size fits all' way of conducting engagement). Another key term is 'practitioner', which refers to those who are involved in carrying out engagement in their profession or discipline (including researchers). This term is considered to be inclusive of practice-enablers, who are considered to be those who work to share, reinforce, and/or expand the work and impact of practitioners (e.g., those who are more involved in engagement strategy rather than carrying out engagement on-the-ground). For clarity, practitioners and practice-enablers are referred to collectively as 'practitioners' in this thesis unless otherwise specified. The 'public' includes anyone who is (or could be) involved in the engagement process and 'stakeholder' describes groups/and or individuals who can affect, or could be affected by, a decision (Freeman, 1984; Rowe and Frewer, 2005). Planning and environmental decision-making processes are conceptualised broadly in this thesis and are considered to include research, conservation, sustainability and climate change, urban planning and development, and land and agriculture, among other specialist and interrelated areas (the contributions of this thesis will likely also be more broadly relevant to engagement in other decision-making processes). The glossary provides a full list of the researcher's understanding of definitions used in this thesis. Chapter 2 provides a critical review of these key terms.

This interdisciplinary and participatory PhD project was problem-oriented and impact-focused, which involved engaging with non-academic stakeholders throughout the research process. As such, it was important for the researcher to consider the needs and priorities of interest groups which included organisations responsible for carrying out engagement processes: Government departments, non-departmental public bodies, consultancies and private businesses, local authorities, charities and not-for-profits, and engagement software companies. The research (including the aims and research questions) was continuously adapted through identifying interest groups, as well as listening, and responding to, the needs of potential users and beneficiaries. It was also important to learn from what works (and what does not work), while remaining curious and open-minded to ask new questions and embark on new research trajectories. Chapter 3 explores the impact-focused elements of this research, engagement with non-academic stakeholders, challenges encountered and how lessons learned were shared with academic and practitioner communities. The names of specific stakeholder organisations are withheld to protect their right to anonymity.

Goals for achieving impact were identified at the start of the research and were adapted in response to stakeholder need. To help achieve these goals, the first steps towards an impact plan were developed through engaging with stakeholders. Within the available time and resources, the research made positive and meaningful steps on the journey towards fulfilling the impact goal (Chapter 8 provides a discussion of how the pathway to impact will continue beyond this research project). The impact goal of the research was to:

> **Impact goal:** To enhance existing practices for effective public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes in the UK, by producing evidence from the research that meets gaps in current understanding and can contribute to existing models (and guidance, toolkits, frameworks, etc.) for explaining what works. Specifically, the research will contribute knowledge about the challenges and opportunities for digital engagement and institutionalising effective engagement strategies. This will be achieved by disseminating the research findings to potential users and beneficiaries of the research (e.g., through evidence reports, briefs, blog posts, social media, infographics, and webinars), engaging closely with specific stakeholders to understand their needs and requirements, and collecting feedback about the utility of the evidence provided. Longer term (likely beyond the timeline of the PhD project), the evidence produced by this research will be tested with wider stakeholder groups, with the aim of enhancing and (further) embedding effective

engagement across environment and planning organisations in the UK public, private, and third sectors.

The motive behind these impact goals was to produce evidence for stakeholders in a relevant, useful, and (where possible within the available resources) timely manner to help achieve tangible impacts in real world situations. This was driven by the researcher's own personal values that research should remain useful beyond academia in order to make a meaningful and positive change in the world, which was strengthened throughout the PhD journey.

The following sections set the scene for this research and provide justification for why the aim and research questions were an important line of enquiry. The research questions are included in section 1.3 alongside an overview of the methodology and approach.

1.2 Research background and rationales

Tackling complex environmental issues requires flexible, transparent decision-making processes that incorporate a diversity of knowledges and values. Public and stakeholder engagement is increasingly advocated and embedded in environmental decision-making processes to meet a spectrum of normative, substantive, and instrumental goals: people have a right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives; a plurality of views provides better knowledge to inform decision-making processes; engagement helps to increase the legitimacy of decisions and enhance the credibility and trust of decision-making organisations (Fiorino, 1990; Stirling, 2008b). As such, the involvement of members of the public and other stakeholder groups (for example, local authorities, businesses, and charities) has been increasingly sought after and embedded in research, policy, and practice from local to international scales (Butler *et al.*, 2020; Konisky and Beierle, 2001; OECD, 2022; Reed, 2008). The policy and practice context of this research is outlined below. However, the success of engagement in achieving its goals is highly variable between different contexts (Baker and Chapin, 2018; Reed, Vella, *et al.*, 2018a). Whether engagement achieves its goals and benefits, or succumbs to its risks and pitfalls, is shaped by dynamic interactions between a range of contextual factors including socio-economic dimensions, cultural and political contexts, institutional/organisational fit of different types of engagement, process design factors, power dynamics, spatial and temporal scales (Baker and Chapin, 2018; Bell and Reed, 2021; Reed *et al.*, 2018a; Rijke *et al.*, 2012; de Vente *et al.*, 2016). It is important to understand how different engagement processes, methods, tools, and approaches fit their desired purpose by understanding how particular contextual factors shape the balance of engagement's benefits and risks.

This thesis is situated within a complex and changing political landscape in the UK and internationally, and the research identified a range of policy and practice hooks through engagement with non-academic stakeholders. The UK is signatory to the Aarhus convention (1998) which granted public rights to access information, public participation, and access to justice in environmental decision-making process. The Gunning Principles (1985) provided explicit consideration to the laws of engagement and public consultation (see Local Government Association, 2019). The UK's 25 Year Environment Plan (25YEP) acknowledged the importance of public and stakeholder engagement for monitoring indicators and achieving environmental goals (Defra, 2018). There is considerable opportunity to further embed engagement at the heart of strategies for improving the environment and in a recent review (to which the researcher was able to contribute findings from this thesis; see Chapter 3), Defra (2022) identified the increasing need for public and stakeholder engagement in policy decision-making. The UK Government Planning White Paper (2020) and Levelling Up White Paper (2022) both identified aspirations for improved public engagement strategies and a greater emphasis on the use of digital technologies to facilitate this. The UK's Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill[1] set out priorities to enable adequate public engagement in planning and development decision-making. Natural England (NE), a non-departmental body sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (Defra) stated in their Action Plan (2021-22) that nature belongs to everyone, and everyone should therefore contribute to its recovery (the NE Action Plan has since been refreshed for 2022-23; see Natural England, 2022). The Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) sponsored a report of the evidence on the use of public engagement in policy development and regulation of technological innovation (d'Angelo *et al.,* 2021) and of key concepts relating to net zero public engagement and participation (Demski, 2021). Similarly, Natural England (NE) sponsored a recent evidence report exploring how the organisation could further embed an evidence-led, best practice culture of engagement (Hafferty, 2022), which was part of NE's work to implement their Science, Evidence, and Evaluation Strategy (Natural England, 2020).

At the time of writing this thesis, the UK Government had recently announced plans that threatened to scrap vital environmental legislation and incentives that protect nature and human health, alongside the lift of the fracking ban in England[2], proposals for the creation of

[1] The UK Parliament Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill can be viewed online at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-03/0169/220169.pdf.

[2] In 2022, the (then) Prime Minister Liz Truss U-turned by lifting the ban on fracking for shale gas (e.g., see https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/articles/Liz-Truss%27s-overturn-of-fracking-ban-in-Britain-is-sparking-grassroots-resistance). Later in the year, the new Prime Minister Rishi Sunak reinstated the fracking ban in England. This highlights the unstable and tumultuous political context within which this thesis was written.

Investment Zones and Freeports, and a proposed review of the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) which promised more resilient and nature-friendly farming[3]. In response, environmental charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) condemned these changes as an 'attack on nature'[4] and joined forces to put pressure on the Government to retain environmental legislation. Of particular interest to this thesis is the widespread call among these charities and NGOs for the involvement of members of the public and stakeholder groups in these decisions. For example, the National Trust set out a series of 'red lines' that cannot be lost in upcoming Government policies: '{The} Government should listen and collaborate with the public, as well as conservation charities, farming groups, businesses and others who can inform decision making on what they propose' (National Trust, 2022). In addition, the National Trust, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), in collaboration with the UK's leading public participation charity Involve UK, have collaborated to initiate the People's Plan for Nature[5] which aims to engage the public in responses to ongoing societal and ecological crises. Despite the Government's reiterated commitment to environmental protections[6], proposed deregulation and short-term goals for economic growth threaten to undermine future resilience, prosperity, and health: sustainable economic growth cannot be achieved without a healthy environment for people and for nature. Central to this is the need for more effective and inclusive approaches for engaging public and stakeholder groups in environment and planning decision-making.

1.2.1 Effective stakeholder engagement

A number of distinct rationales for engagement have been identified: rooted in concepts of deliberative democracy, people have a right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives; a plurality of views provides better knowledge to inform decision-making processes; engagement helps to increase the legitimacy of decisions and enhance the credibility and trust of decision-making organisations (Dryzek, 2002; Fiorino, 1990; Stirling, 2008). The claimed benefits of engagement include more representative decision-making processes, empowering stakeholders, addressing local needs and priorities, promoting shared learning and developing

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[3] UK environment laws under threat in 'deregulatory free-for-all' (Laville, 2022), The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/sep/23/uk-environment-laws-under-threat-in-deregulatory-free-for-all.

[4] Green charities urge millions of members to oppose Tories' 'attack on nature' (Laville, 2022), The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/sep/27/green-charities-urge-millions-of-members-to-oppose-tories-attack-on-nature.

[5] People's Plan for Nature aims to give members of the public a voice in co-creating a vision for the future of UK nature, including a People's Assembly for Nature: https://peoplesplanfornature.org/.

[6] Government reiterates commitment to environmental protections (Defra Press Office, 2022): https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2022/09/28/government-reiterates-commitment-to-environmental-protections/.

trusting relationships between diverse actors (e.g., Cass, 2006; Defra, 2022; Ferreira *et al.*, 2020; OECD, 2022; Reed, 2008). However, failure to deliver on the benefits of engagement continues to create disillusionment amongst practitioners, stakeholders, and members of the public alike (Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Falco and Kleinhans, 2018a; Few *et al.*, 2016; Reed *et al.*, 2018a). This remains a risk for efforts towards effective engagement in planning and environmental decision-making (and more broadly); engagement can work to reinforce unequal power structures and top-down control, marginalise minority perspectives, increase mistrust, and cause resource-intensive delays, among other issues and risks. Central to these debates is the consideration of participant needs and priorities, knowledge prioritisation, fairness and trust, and whose reality 'counts' in participatory environmental decision-making processes (Smith and McDonough, 2001; Chambers, 2006; Krupa, McCarthy Cunfer and Clark, 2020).

To help frame these debates and provide an explanation for what works, a range of typologies, models, frameworks, and theories have been developed (e.g., Arnstein, 1969; Bell and Reed, 2021; IAP2, 2018; Pretty, 1995; Reed *et al.*, 2018a). Of particular interest to this thesis are two models and theories which emphasise the role and influence of contextual factors in the design, process, and evaluation of engagement processes: the wheel of participation (e.g., Reed *et al.*, 2018a) and the tree of participation (Bell and Reed, 2021a) which both explain how different engagement processes, methods, and tools are 'fit for purpose' while considering participatory rationales, contextual factors, socio-economic dimensions, power structures, institutional fit, design factors, space and time scales, among other factors (Baker and Chapin, 2018; de Vente *et al.,* 2016; Reed *et al.*, 2018a; Rijke *et al.*, 2012). However, these models and theories lack consideration of how these factors might change in the digital age. At present, no research has considered the extent to which these models hold in digital and remote environments. Although the effectiveness of the processes, structures, principles, and frameworks underpinning engagement has always been subject to external and internal drivers (including contextual factors and socio-economic dynamics), the literature suggests that engagement processes take on new dimensions in digital and remote environments compared to in-person methods. In an increasingly digitised world, it is therefore essential that engagement remains meaningful, inclusive of marginalised groups and individuals, and is effective in achieving its intended positive outcomes.

1.2.2 Digital tools for engagement

Digital technology is continuously transforming engagement and other participatory approaches in research, policy, and practice (Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Rawat and Yusuf, 2019; Rowe and Gammack, 2004; Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). At the same time, public and stakeholder engagement plays an important role for governance and innovation in science, technology, and democratic political spheres (Bernholz *et al.*, 2021; European Commission, 2020; Macnaghten and Chilvers, 2014; Schwanholz, *et al.*, 2018). For example, recent guidelines for participation developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) identified that digital tools can allow members of the public and stakeholders to interact and become involved with decision-making processes in different ways (OECD, 2022). In the UK, national strategies for digital transformation and economic growth have followed a 'digital-by-default' or 'digital-first' mantra in line with the Government's aspirations to become a world leader in digital adoption (Cabinet Office, 2012; Government Digital Service, 2017; Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022; DDCMS, 2022). One key issue with these narratives and associated strategies is the lack of consideration for the wider societal implications of rapid and unregulated digital transformation. The research suggests significant ethical risks for society including the exacerbation of existing exclusions, injustices, bias and prejudices (Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Tsamados *et al.*, 2021).

It is important to be clear about how key terms related to digital engagement are understood in this thesis. First, there is a distinction between digital and online tools: 'online' means that a technology is connected to a computer and the internet, whereas 'digital' can be considered as a format or process, including technology that uses, stores, and processes data or information in the form of digital signals (i.e., digital tools can be either online or offline, and can be used remotely or in-person). Digital tools can also be categorised as (taking place in real time) and asynchronous (conducted remotely and at different times) (e.g., Salmons, 2016). This thesis focuses on 'digital and remote' engagement unless otherwise specified. The glossary includes the researcher's understanding of key definitions and Chapter 2 reviews the terms used in this thesis in more detail.

There are still many unresolved questions about the benefits of digital and data-driven technologies and their effectiveness at addressing the goals of engagement (Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Jankowski *et al.*, 2019; Pham and Massey, 2018). These questions became increasingly pertinent during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which accelerated the adoption and deployment of digital technology in the UK and across the globe and placed a spotlight on technology-related disparities. The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant and long-lasting global human and economic costs and a traumatic impact on people's everyday lives. During this period (and beyond), governments and other decision-makers have been making decisions in an environment characterised by rapidly changing conditions and profound uncertainties about the future. In the UK, the first national lockdown commenced on the 16th of March 2020 when the (then) Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced that 'now is the time for everyone to stop non-essential contact and travel'[7]. The rapid transformation of how people live and work, including mandated requirements to stay at home for lockdown periods, led to a rapid increase in digitalisation and the use of different tools and technologies to enable people to remain connected. As the pandemic progressed, it became increasingly evident that the impacts and challenges of the pandemic (including rapid digitalisation) were not equitably or evenly distributed across society (e.g., Robinson and Johnson, 2021). During this unprecedented period of time, PhD research was rapidly re-assessed and reframed as planned fieldwork activities were cancelled, which involved being agile in responding to the needs and requirements of potential users and beneficiaries of the research (see Chapter 3). Of particular interest to this thesis is the question of whether effective engagement (i.e., engagement that achieves its intended goals and benefits) can be conducted in digital and remote settings (McKinley *et al.*, 2021; Robinson and Johnson, 2021; Willis *et al.*, 2021).

1.2.3 Institutionalising engagement

To be successful in the long-term, public and stakeholder engagement (and any participatory process) needs to be institutionalised. If digital tools are ultimately going to help deliver sustainable and resilient decisions, then they need to be embedded as part of an organisation-wide strategy for undertaking effective engagement (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2016; Baker and Chapin, 2018; Bussu *et al.*, 2022; Reed, 2008; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). For example, institutionalising participation was highlighted as a key goal for the Scottish Government, supported by an Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Working Group (Government, 2022). There is also a lot of potential to further embed engagement across the work of UK Government departments and non-departmental public bodies (e.g., Defra, 2022; Demski, 2021; Hafferty, 2022). Such strategies must consider knowledge gaps regarding the opportunities and constraints for public sector officials (and other practitioners) working to embed participatory practices (Escobar, 2021). Institutionalising engagement may require an organisational cultural shift, which is a complex task as organisations are continuously in the making (Pallett and Chilvers, 2015); any work to initiate and embed such a shift needs to be undertaken with a good understanding of the range of existing rationales for engagement, along with current practices, assumptions, expertise, capacity, capability, and a range of other organisational challenges. The temptation to embrace a 'digital first' or 'digital-by-default' (Cabinet Office, 2012; Government Digital Service, 2017; DDCMS, 2022) narrative and approach without considering the organisational

[7] Timeline of UK coronavirus lockdowns, March 2020 to March 2021. Institute for Government. Online at: https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf.

context risks causing unintended negative consequences, as with any poorly reasoned, designed, and/or delivered engagement process.

This thesis aims to understand practitioners' perspectives of effective stakeholder engagement in UK planning and environmental decision-making processes. Practitioners' perspectives (i.e., the perspectives of those responsible for carrying out engagement) were focused on (as opposed to the perspectives of public and stakeholder participants) because although there is a rich and expansive body of literature on participant experiences of engagement processes, there remains comparatively less consideration of practitioner views, experiences, and organisational constraints for delivering engagement (e.g., Wesselink *et al.*, 2011; Escobar, 2021; this is discussed in more depth in Chapter 2). Through interdisciplinary and participatory research with practitioners and practice-enablers (the approach is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3), the research seeks to investigate the effectiveness of digital tools for meeting the goals and benefits of engagement. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the technical and ethical debates around the use of digital technologies. It also seeks to understand the fundamental contextual factors and socio-economic dynamics which underpin effective engagement, regardless of the digital or in-person methods used, by exploring the challenges and opportunities for carrying out and embedding effective engagement in the organisations and institutions responsible for delivering these processes. In achieving these aims, this thesis seeks to enhance existing theories and models which explain what works for effective engagement. The research questions are introduced later in this chapter.

1.3 Research aims and methods

The overall aim of this thesis was to understand practitioners' perspectives on what works for effective public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes. This focused on decision-making processes in the UK. More specifically, this thesis aimed to:

- Investigate whether effective public and stakeholder engagement can be carried out in digital and remote environments.
- Explore the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising engagement, including how organisational and institutional factors interact with other contextual factors and socio-economic dynamics which can influence effective engagement (regardless of the digital or in-person approach).
- In doing so, this thesis aimed to explore whether current theories and models for engagement account for the dimensions of digital engagement and institutionalising

engagement, in order to contribute to existing understandings of effective engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes.

These aims are delivered by addressing the following three research questions:

RQ1: How effective are digital tools for meeting the goals and benefits of engagement?

RQ2: What are the challenges for institutionalising engagement and how can they be overcome?

RQ3: Building on the previous two research questions, what contributions can be made to enhance current theories and models which explain what works for effective engagement?

Each research question was designed to build on the other research questions: RQ2 built on RQ1 by exploring the more fundamental factors that explain outcomes in engagement (regardless of the digital or in-person method used) within an organisational context. The final question, RQ3, aimed to build on both RQ1 and RQ2 by bringing the findings together and considering how they contributed to gaps identified in existing theories and models for engagement. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

To answer these questions, an interdisciplinary and participatory approach was developed which was agile to responding to the needs of potential users and beneficiaries of the research. This thesis utilised a sequential mixed-methods approach including a survey questionnaire to capture a snapshot of practitioners' perspectives of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes. To explore these issues in more depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with practitioners who were involved with engaging members of the public and other stakeholder groups. This included a range of practitioners and practice-enablers working in UK Government departments, non-departmental public bodies, local authorities, charities/not-for-profits, consultancies, and software companies.

The research approach was problem-focused and motivated by aspirations for achieving real-world impact (e.g., ESRC, 2022a, 2022b; Reed, 2018). This involved testing and adapting the research questions and aims with interest groups, and potential users and beneficiaries of the research. This directly led to changes in the research, including the introduction of a new research question (research question two) which was developed in response to themes emerging from in-depth interviews, as well as needs and priorities identified during the stakeholder engagement and outreach activities that were interwoven throughout the research project. The research design and methodology are discussed in Chapter 3.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. **Chapter 2** provides an overview of the existing relevant literature (including a discussion of diverse terminologies and the theories influencing this thesis) and identifies research gaps. **Chapter 3** includes a discussion of the research design and methodology, the interdisciplinary and participatory approach of this thesis (and how this influenced the research design), the impact-focused aspects of this thesis and engagement activities with potential users and beneficiaries of the research (including the impact of the pandemic and key lessons learned), and a reflexive account of the ethical implications of the research.

The empirical findings from the research are presented and analysed in three chapters. **Chapter 4** is a short and descriptive chapter which links the methodology and subsequent results chapters by including the findings of the survey questionnaire. **Chapter 5** presents the findings of the semi-structured interviews to explore the effectiveness of digital tools for meeting the goals of engagement. Building on Chapter 5, **Chapter 6** includes the findings of the semi-structured interviews to explore the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising engagement.

Chapter 7 brings the findings from the empirical chapters together and discuss them within the context of the literature, including a discussion of how the findings from Chapters 5 and 6 contribute to existing models and theories for engagement. The concluding **Chapter 8** presents a summary of the key findings for each research question and an evaluation of the research. This chapter considers the implications of the findings for theoretical and empirical understandings of what works for public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes (and more broadly), including recommendations for future research. A roadmap for achieving impact in the future is also outlined, including a strategy for research dissemination, engagement, and impact evaluation.

1.5 A note on the presentation of this thesis

This thesis is written in a way that is intended to be accessible to practitioners as well as an academic audience. This is important because a core focus of the research was on impact and engagement with non-academic stakeholders. The research questions and aims were continuously tested and adapted according to the needs and priorities of potential interest groups, users, and beneficiaries of the research. The thesis is written in a clear and concise manner, with key messages highlighted and (where possible) the thesis avoids the use of jargon, and when specialist words are used, they are defined. All key terms used in this thesis are clarified in the text and summarised in the glossary. Each chapter (where appropriate) is summarised in a text box so that the key points can be quickly and easily accessed by practitioners. In the empirical results chapters, the findings within each sub-heading are also summarised in a text box to aid navigation and understanding. The findings of this thesis have been continuously disseminated to interested groups throughout the research process, engagement and outreach activities are described in the methodology chapter and in the appendices, and an impact and dissemination plan is outlined in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 2: Engagement in the digital age: review of the literature

2.1 Introduction

This thesis brings together multiple strands of literature, from within and beyond academic disciplines, to explore what works for public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes. In particular, this review considers how effective engagement is carried out in an increasingly digitised world, focusing on whether the factors which lead to effective engagement take on new dimensions in virtual environments. The literature review includes the following topics: (i) diverse understandings and terminology; (ii) different rationales, benefits, and limitations, including different models for engagement and how we can use theory to understand what works in practice; (iii) digital tools for engagement, including a landscape of different tools and the technical and ethical debates around their use; (iv) the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising engagement.

The literature review draws from interdisciplinary research spanning research, policy, and practice. It is focused on stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes, drawing from the relevant literature in geography, planning, environmental governance, natural resource management, ecology and conservation, farming and agriculture, and other related fields. As this review demonstrates, 'engagement' is conceptualised and applied in diverse ways across different areas of research and practice. Learnings are also included from science and technology studies (STS), energy research, democratic innovation, political theory, policy and government, geographic information science (GIScience), digital ethics, and health research. Through combining diverse and complementary understandings of engagement from within and beyond academic research, this review comprehensively tackles the complex and multi-dimensional problem of understanding effective engagement.

To develop the understandings from this diverse body of literature, this review highlights a variety of factors that can enhance and/or constrain effective public and stakeholder engagement. This focuses on key models and theories for explaining what works for engagement including the classic ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) and more recent models that enable contextual factors to be increasingly considered and embedded in engagement processes through a flexible and adaptable approach (Bell and Reed, 2021;

Reed *et al.,* 2018a). It is then considered how the foundational factors and principles that help explain outcomes in engagement can take on new dimensions in digital and remote environments, by introducing digital tools for engagement before exploring the technical and ethical debates around digital technologies. The review then focuses on one particular factor which is fundamental to explaining engagement outcomes and is currently underexplored: organisational barriers and the dynamics of embedding engagement as part of an institutionalised culture change. The themes explored in this review provide structure for the research questions (see Chapter 1, section 1.3): section 2.6 helps to provide context and rationale for research question one (RQ1); section 2.7 provides context for research question two (RQ2); and section 2.3 provides a review of the theoretical frameworks which frame this thesis, providing context and rational for the third research question (RQ3).

Box 1. Published reviews of the literature

This chapter is based on two peer-reviewed manuscripts which are listed below.

Manuscript I: Hafferty, C. (2022a). Embedding an evidence-led, best practice culture of engagement: learning from the evidence. Natural England Commissioned Report NECR448. Available at: http://nepubprod.appspot.com/publication/5365328451469312.

Author's role and contribution: the author was responsible for the structure, theoretical implications, and the content of the review presented in the article.

Restrictions: N/A. The author would like to acknowledge and thank the internal reviewers for their generous feedback on this manuscript. With acknowledgement and thanks also to Beth Brockett, Cheryl Willis, Paul Hinds, and Rose O'Neill.

Supplementary material for manuscript I: Hafferty, C. (2022b). Best practice stakeholder engagement: learning from the evidence (infographic resource pack). *University of Gloucestershire.* Available at: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/11434/.

Author's role and contribution: the author was solely responsible for the design of this infographic pack, which was created to disseminate key themes from the evidence report (Hafferty, 2022a).

Restrictions: N/A. The author would like to acknowledge and thank the internal reviewers for their generous feedback on the original report.

Manuscript II: Hafferty, C., Babelon, I., Berry, R., Brockett, B., Hoggett, J. (forthcoming[8]). Digital tools for participatory environmental decision-making: Opportunities, challenges, and future directions. In: Sherren, K., Thondhlana, G., and Jackson-Smith, D. (eds). *Opening Windows: Emerging Perspectives, Practices and Opportunities in Natural Resource Social Sciences.*

Author's role and contribution: the author was responsible for the structure, theoretical implications, and the content of the review presented in the article.

Restrictions: the author was not involved in the creation of two Figures in the manuscript, which were designed by Babelon and inspired by the literature. The author would like to acknowledge and thank the two anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback on the original version of the manuscript.

[8] Manuscript peer-reviewed and accepted for inclusion in the edited decadal volume of natural resource social sciences (June 2022). It is important to note that at the time of writing this thesis the book manuscript had not yet been officially commissioned by the publisher, Utah State University Press. At the time of writing, the title of the book included in the reference is a working title.

2.2 Diverse understandings and terminologies

It is important to be clear about what is meant by key terms used in this thesis. A glossary is provided in this thesis (see page 7) to clarify the researcher's interpretation of key terms used. This section aims to set a clear narrative and coherent base of understanding for this thesis by critically discussing and clarifying key terminologies relating to 'engagement' in research, policy, and practice. Through doing so, it is specific about what different terms and concepts include (and do not include), providing the clarity and coherent base of understanding necessary for robust research which can meaningfully contribute to the literature.

Definitions relating to 'public and stakeholder engagement' are diverse, complex, and change between different areas of research and practice (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Elstub and Escobar, 2019; Hafferty, 2022; Heinelt, 2018; Rawat and Yusuf, 2019; Reed, 2008; Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). The range of terminology, and the diversity of its interpretation and application, can be confusing (and even contradictory) and in addition broad concepts of engagement arguably leave too much room for interpretation (e.g., Chilvers, 2009; Rowe and Frewer, 2004; 2005; Reed, 2008). Key terms include 'engagement', 'participation', 'consultation', 'deliberation' (e.g., see OECD, 2022) which are all terms that are used (sometimes interchangeably) to describe the process of involving members of the public or other stakeholder groups. There are also a range of terms used to describe actors involved in this process including those responsible for carrying out the process (e.g., 'engagers', 'coordinators', 'consultors') and those who are involved (e.g., 'citizens', 'publics', 'stakeholders', 'communities', 'residents'). There are also a range of terms used to describe digital engagement tools, methods, and approaches which are discussed later in this chapter (see section 2.6). The purpose of this review of diverse terminologies (and the glossary) is not to provide an exhaustive list of terms, nor does it make claims that these are the most accurate or appropriate definitions of the terms. Instead, it provides clarification of the researcher's interpretation of key terms used in this thesis while acknowledging the diversity of other understandings and uses in the literature.

In this thesis, engagement is defined after Reed (2008) as a process whereby individuals, groups, and/or organisations choose to take an active role in decisions which affect them. The term 'engagement' is understood as a specific term which describes a more formal process (e.g., a process led by an organisation for a particular purpose), whereas 'participation' is understood as a broad umbrella term which encompasses engagement. In other words, while all engagement is grounded in participatory principles (to lesser or greater extents), not all participation is engagement[9].

To demonstrate these underlying participatory principles, one definition of participation is provided by Kindon (2009) as a way of: 'effectively and ethically engaging people in processes, structures, spaces, and decisions that affect their lives, and working with them to achieve equitable and sustainable outcomes on their own terms' (p. 518) which emphasises the rootedness of participation in social justice issues, focusing on concepts which recognise and critique social inequalities and power relations (Kesby *et al.*, 2007; Pain *et al.*, 2011). Even more broadly and beyond enabling us to understand differences and inequalities, participation can be understood as an approach that can enable researchers (and others who practice participatory methods and approaches) to be the change we wish to see in the world (Chatterton *et al.,* 2007). Participatory research and practice can also be considered as a 'way of being' (Rigolot, 2020) which is embedded personal values[10] (Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the participatory approach implemented in this thesis).

In this thesis, 'engagement' is considered to include more focused engagement (e.g., with a specific project or decision-making process) which targets specific stakeholder groups and individuals, and wider engagement (e.g., a public awareness campaign) that involves broader publics. Here, 'the public' is defined as a broad term relating to anyone who is (or could be) involved in the engagement process (Rowe and Frewer, 2005). The term 'publics' refers to the public as a whole or collective entity (the 'general public'), including groups of people who share a common opinion, desire, or interest, but who are not organised and may be dispersed (e.g., the voting public). Although the term 'citizen' is widely used throughout the literature (e.g., 'citizen engagement' or 'citizen participation'; see Falco and Kleinhans, 2018a; Wagenet and Pfeffer, 2007; Scottish Government, 2022), this thesis does not use the term (unless to make a specific reference) as it can be interpretated as exclusionary of non-citizen groups.

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[9] While this outlines the specific interpretation and application of these terms in this thesis, there are other different (and sometimes conflicting) understandings of what these terms mean and how they relate to one another. For example, the OECD's (2022) guidelines includes an extensive list of resources for understanding and implementing participation: https://www.oecd.org/publications/oecd-guidelines-for-citizen-participation-processes-f765caf6-en.htm. This includes public participation charity Involve UK's knowledge base (https://involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base), Participedia's vast crowdsourced hub of public participation and democratic innovation (https://participedia.net/), and the European Commission's guidelines and definitions on stakeholder consultation (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/better-regulation-guidelines-stakeholder-consultation.pdf).

[10] To further demonstrate what this participatory 'way of being' (Rigolot, 2020) might look like in practice, the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Participatory Geographies Research Group (PyGyRG) is a collective of like-minded members who share participatory values and aim to raise the profile, perceived value, and further understanding of participatory approaches, methods, tools, and principles within and beyond academic geography (https://pygyrg.org; also see Hafferty *et al.,* 2021; Wynne-Jones *et al.*, 2015).

The term ‘stakeholder’ is used in this thesis to describe groups and/or individuals who can affect, or could be affected by, a decision – i.e., they have a stake in the process (Freeman, 1984; Reed, 2008). Stakeholders can include members of the public and other groups such as local authorities, charities, businesses, non-governmental organisations, community-led groups, and so forth. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are various issues with the term ‘stakeholder’, which include its roots in colonial practices and potential to exclude and/or marginalise Indigenous groups and people. The term has been critiqued in academic publications (calling for the term to be used with care or even banished entirely, e.g., see Banerjee, 2003; Sharfstein, 2016), in blog posts (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2017; Laidlaw, 2018; Reed, 2022b), online forums, and has been subject to extensive debate on Twitter. Suggested alternative terms include ‘partners’, ‘rightsholders’, ‘interest groups’, and the importance of making a distinction between stakeholders and Rights holders has also been highlighted (e.g., see Indigenous Corporate Training, 2017; Clayton, 2014; Government of British Columbia, 2021). Within a research context, Reed and Rudman (2022) use ‘interested/affected groups and non-academic partners’ as an alternative term which could be adapted for use in policy and practice. Although the debates around ‘stakeholder’ are recognised, this thesis continued to use the term with careful acknowledgement of these issues. This is because Freeman’s (1984) definition is clear, useful, relevant and (perhaps most importantly for this thesis) is widely used and understood in both academic and practitioner spheres. At present, there is no suitable alternative to use which is as widely applicable and recognised across multiple disciplines and spanning research, policy, and practice. There is considerable opportunity to debate and re-think the use of the word ‘stakeholder’ in the future[11].

2.3 Public and stakeholder engagement: rationales, benefits, and risks

A number of distinct rationales for engagement have been identified: normatively, people have a right to be involved in and influence the decisions that affect their lives; substantively, engagement incorporates diverse knowledge types into decision-making processes, which helps to enhance the quality of decisions and the evidence that they are based on; and instrumentally, engagement can improve decision-making outcomes, helping to increase the perceived legitimacy and credibility of decisions and the organisations making them (Fiorino, 1990; Fischer, 2000; Stirling, 2006, 2008). Rooted in concepts of deliberative democracy, engagement and other participatory processes can help to empower voices which are often

[11] A blog post on the website Fast Track Impact (Reed, 2022b) explored the debates around the word ‘stakeholder’, questioning whether we should avoid using the word entirely and calling for more investigation into alternatives that could be used to replace it (see: https://www.fasttrackimpact.com/post/why-we-shouldn-t-banish-the-word-stakeholder).

marginalised in research, practice, and policy decision-making (Dryzek, 2002). Indeed, there is consensus in research, policy, and practice arenas alike that contemporary democracy needs greater public legitimacy (Chilvers and Kearnes, 2020; Elstub and Escobar, 2019). Engaging public and other stakeholder groups can be particularly valuable where contested or conflicting interests and priorities are at play, and when decision-making processes involve trade-offs or other risks and complexities (Choi *et al.*, 2021; Waterton, and Tsouvalis, 2016; Urquhart, 2007; Whatmore and Landström, 2011). Numerous areas of work in government and non-departmental public bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), charities, local authorities, consultancies (and so forth) in the environment and planning sectors (including work in planning, development and infrastructure, food, forestry, natural resource management, flooding, species introduction and nature-based solutions arenas) typically involve at least some of these characteristics.

This thesis is situated within a complex and dynamic political landscape in the UK and internationally. The international policy context (which is directly relevant to policy in the UK) is defined by the Rio Declaration (1992) which stated that environmental issues are best handled with the participation of concerned citizens, and the UK is signatory to the Aarhus convention (1998) which granted public rights to access information, public participation, and access to justice in environmental decision-making process. Within the UK, the Gunning Principles (1985) provided four legally binding principles for engagement and consultation including early involvement, sufficient and accessible information, adequate time for consultation, and the requirement that decision-makers provide evidence that they took consultation responses into account (see Local Government Association, 2019). There is a lot of movement in UK planning and environmental policy to enhance and embed more effective engagement in policy and practice: the 25 Year Environment Plan (25YEP) acknowledged the importance of public and stakeholder engagement achieving environmental goals (Defra, 2018); the UK Government Planning White Paper (2020) and Levelling Up White Paper (2022) both identified aspirations for improved public engagement strategies, particularly via digital technologies; Natural England (NE) stated in their Action Plan (2021) that nature belongs to everyone, and everyone should therefore contribute to its recovery (see also Natural England's 2022-23 Action Plan: Natural England, 2022). Various reports and reviews have been published to bring together the evidence to further these agendas: the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) sponsored a report of the evidence on the use of public engagement in policy development and regulation of technological innovation (d'Angelo *et al.,* 2021) and zero public engagement and participation (Demski, 2021); Defra produced a recent review of public engagement for policy decision-making (Defra, 2022); Natural England (NE) sponsored a recent evidence report on embedding an evidence-led, best practice culture of engagement (Hafferty, 2022), which was part of broader work to implement their Science, Evidence, and Evaluation Strategy (Natural England, 2020). There has been an impressive effort for enhancing and embedding engagement in devolved UK nations, with notable progress made in Scotland. For example, the Scottish Government published key messages about public service reform in the country including lowering barriers to participation, investing in capacity and skills, improving the deliberative quality of participatory processes, investing in digital participation, demonstrating the impact of participation, and fostering a participatory culture in public bodies (Scottish Government, 2019). More recently, the Scottish Government published a report that sets out their ambition for transformative change to deliver more participatory and inclusive democracy, which involved establishing an Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Working Group (Scottish Government, 2022; see section 2.7 of this literature review). The OECD guidelines for citizen participation processes (OECD, 2022) provides a comprehensive list of useful resources for engagement and other participatory processes across the UK and internationally.

The claimed benefits for engagement are widely documented and critically reviewed in the literature in research, policy, and practice (e.g., Ferreira *et al.*, 2020; OECD, 2022; Reed, 2008). Many of these benefits and associated pitfalls are discussed throughout this chapter within the context of digital engagement and institutionally embedding participatory processes. Broadly, the benefits for effective engagement can include:

- Including relevant stakeholders in decision-making can help ensure that the process and outcomes are more representative of diverse voices, which can reduce the likelihood that people are marginalised and overlooked (Kloprogge and Sluijs, 2006; Martin and Sherington, 1997). Decision-making processes which aim to tackle complex environmental issues must incorporate diverse knowledges, values, needs, and requirements.

- Empowering stakeholders to become involved in decision-making processes, particularly through the co-design of decision-making processes and co-production of knowledge, while also having the potential to increase participants' ability to use and implement this knowledge (Greenwood *et al.*, 1993; Jupp, 2007).

- Enhancing trust and credibility in decision-making processes and the organisations making them (Richards *et al.*, 2004), particularly if engagement is perceived as transparent, open, and fair by public and stakeholder groups (e.g., that balanced decisions are made considering diverse perspectives).

- Promoting social learning (i.e., when engagement participants can learn from one another), knowledge sharing, and developing relationships, which in turn can increase the trust and credibility of decision-making processes (Banerjee *et al.*, 2019; Kochskämper *et al.*, 2016; Newig and Fritsch, 2009; Stringer *et al.*, 2006).

- Producing more robust empirical knowledge for better decision-making outcomes through the incorporation of diverse knowledge types; incorporating local knowledge alongside scientific (and other) information can help ensure that decisions are based on more comprehensive information, which can mitigate risks and ensure better quality outcomes (Beierle, 2002; Reed 2008).

- When local interests, ideas, and perspectives are taken into account at an early stage (and used to inform the engagement process), this can help to ensure that local needs and priorities are met by the decision-making outcomes (Dougill *et al.*, 2006; Thaler and Levin-Keitel, 2016).

- Helping to create a sense of ownership over the process and outcomes of decision-making among local communities and other stakeholders, which can help to promote trust in the long term (Devine-Wright, 2005; Richards *et al.*, 2004).

However, failure to deliver on the benefits of participation continues to create disillusionment amongst both the participants of engagement and those responsible for carrying out the process (Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Falco and Kleinhans, 2018a; Few *et al.,* 2007; Reed *et al.*, 2018a). A number of risks remain for effective public and stakeholder engagement which can cause a range of unintended negative consequences, particularly if engagement is poorly reasoned, designed, and/or delivered by those responsible for carrying it out; engagement can reinforce unequal power structures, marginalise minority perspectives, increase mistrust, cause delays, amongst other issues and risks. Central to these debates is the consideration of participant needs and priorities, knowledge prioritisation, fairness and trust, power relations and whose reality ‘counts’ in participatory environmental decision-making processes (e.g., Avelino and Wittmayer, 2016; Chambers, 2006; Krupa *et al.*, 2020; Morrison *et al.*, 2019; Smith and McDonough, 2001). The risks associated with engagement can include:

- Participants viewing engagement as a ‘means to an end’. For example, if participants believe that a decision has already been made and/or that their input will have little influence on the outcome, which can be a particular risk if participants have not been engaged early enough in the decision-making process (Chilvers, 2009; Reed, 2008).

- Legitimising decisions and the exertion of top-down power, which can lead to the belief that engagement is manipulative, superficial, and tokenistic (Stirling, 2006, 2008; Wynne, 2006).

- Under-representing groups and individuals, which can mean that engagement processes fail to be representative of those who may want to have a voice in the process and/or could be affected by a decision (Few *et al.*, 2016; O'Neill, 2001).

- The assumption that there is a consensus in public opinion which is just waiting to be tapped in to through engagement, when in reality public and stakeholder opinions are diverse, complex, and dynamic (Pellizzoni, 2003) and can be better anticipated by appreciating local contexts (Devine-Wright, 2009).

- When decision-making outcomes and/or outputs are over-promised to stakeholders but then under-delivered in practice, which can in turn lead to mistrust, disillusionment, and conflict (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Fudge and Leith, 2021; Warner, 2006).

- Excluding people based on the requirement of specific knowledge and skills to meaningfully engage, particularly if the process includes highly technical, expert, or scientific debates (Charnley *et al.*, 2007).

- Engagement becomes a complicated and confusing process for participants, which can create costly and resource-intensive delays while increasing the likelihood that engagement is viewed as a 'talking shop' by participants and not focused on tangible action (Bojórquez-Tapia *et al.*, 2004; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998).

- Participant fatigue due to a complex and confusing process, which can result in actors involved feeling that their involvement has no clear benefits, or it will not be rewarding for them to participate (Bickerstaff and Walker, 2005; Wesselink *et al.*, 2011).

There are a variety of models and theories that help to explain the factors which increase the likelihood that engagement achieves its intended benefits (or succumbs to its risks). These are explored in the next section.

2.3.1 Key models and theories for understanding effective engagement

Different types of engagement can lead to different positive and negative outcomes. It is important to understand the factors which shape the balance of the benefits and risks of engagement. To help provide clarification and structure for what works, a range of typologies, models, frameworks, and theories have been developed to define different levels of engagement, what is involved, the role of (public and stakeholder) actors, and the goals and outcomes. There is a plethora of different types, theories, models, toolkits, frameworks, guidance (and so forth) for participation and stakeholder engagement. These include (but are not limited to) Arnstein's ladder (1969), more recent adaptations of the ladder typology (IAP2, 2018), deliberative democracy (Dryzek, 1990, 1992; Scottish Government, 2021), citizens' assemblies and deliberative mini-publics (Courant, 2022; Sandover *et al.*, 2021), participatory budgeting (Röcke, 2014), participatory politics (parpolity) (Cohen and Kahne, 2011; Loader and Mercea, 2011), participatory crowdfunding (Lam and Law, 2016), procedural justice indicators (Bell, 2014), the wheel of participation (Reed *et al.*, 2018a), and the recent tree of participation (Bell and Reed, 2021). More recently, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) have published 'Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes' which describe steps for designing, planning, implementing, and evaluating participatory processes (OECD, 2022). The knowledge and resource hubs available on the crowdsourced platform Participedia (https://participedia.net/), the OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (https://oecd-opsi.org/case_type/opsi/); the UKERC Observatory for Public Engagement with Energy and Climate Change (https://ukerc-observatory.ac.uk/); and UK public participation charity Involve UK's s resource hub (https://involve.org.uk/resources) provide useful starting points to understand the breadth and complexity of the models available in the UK and internationally. As such, it is not appropriate or realistic to provide an exhaustive review of engagement models in this thesis. Instead, this literature review explores a selection of models and theories based on their influence in research and practice, as well as their suitability and relevance for the central aim of this thesis (to investigate practitioners' perspectives on what works for effective public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes). While some of the models included in this review are based on knowledge and examples from planning and environment research and practice, they are intended to be relevant and useful for participatory decision-making processes more broadly.

Arnstein's classic *ladder of participation* (1969) defines different 'rungs' of citizen participation from low (e.g., information provision and manipulation) to high levels (e.g., partnership working and full citizen control), with each rung corresponding to the amount of power that citizens hold to influence decision-making outcomes (see Figure 1). The ladder of participation has been widely adopted and there have since been numerous attempts to adapt and redesign it (Biggs, 1989; Bruns, 2003; Burns *et al.*, 1994; Connor, 1988; IAP2, 2018; Pretty, 1995; Shier, 2001). One example is the International Association of Public Participation's (IAP2) *Spectrum of Participation* (Figure 2) which is intended to be a global standard of public participation and is used widely by practitioners in planning and development spheres in particular (IAP2, 2018; Babelon *et al.,* 2021). Although these models remain central to debates around participation and engagement, Arnstein's ladder (and its variations) have been critiqued for having a static, linear, and hierarchical structure (e.g., Bell and Reed, 2021; Collins and Raymond, 2014; Ross *et al.*, 2002; Tritter and McCallum, 2006). This is problematic because it assumes that higher levels of participation will achieve better and more impactful outcomes, whereas in reality lower levels (e.g., consultation) may be more appropriate in some situations. The ladder model also requires an organised power based in the community, alongside the necessary resources (including time, finance, knowledge, skills, and so forth) to actively take control of the decision-making process and outcome. Alternative ways of thinking about participation have called for more reflexive practices which understand participation as co-productive, relational, emergent and continuously 'in-the-making' (Chilvers and Pallett, 2018; Chilvers and Kearnes, 2020). Ultimately, it is important to move away from singular models and/or visions of participation (including engagement) towards acknowledging and understanding that these processes are dynamic and vary between different contexts, demographics, and purposes.

Figure 1. Arnstein's ladder of participation. This model defines different 'rungs' of participation from low to high levels. It has been remade and adapted a number of times since its conception and remains a highly influential model. *Source: Arnstein (1969 p. 217).*

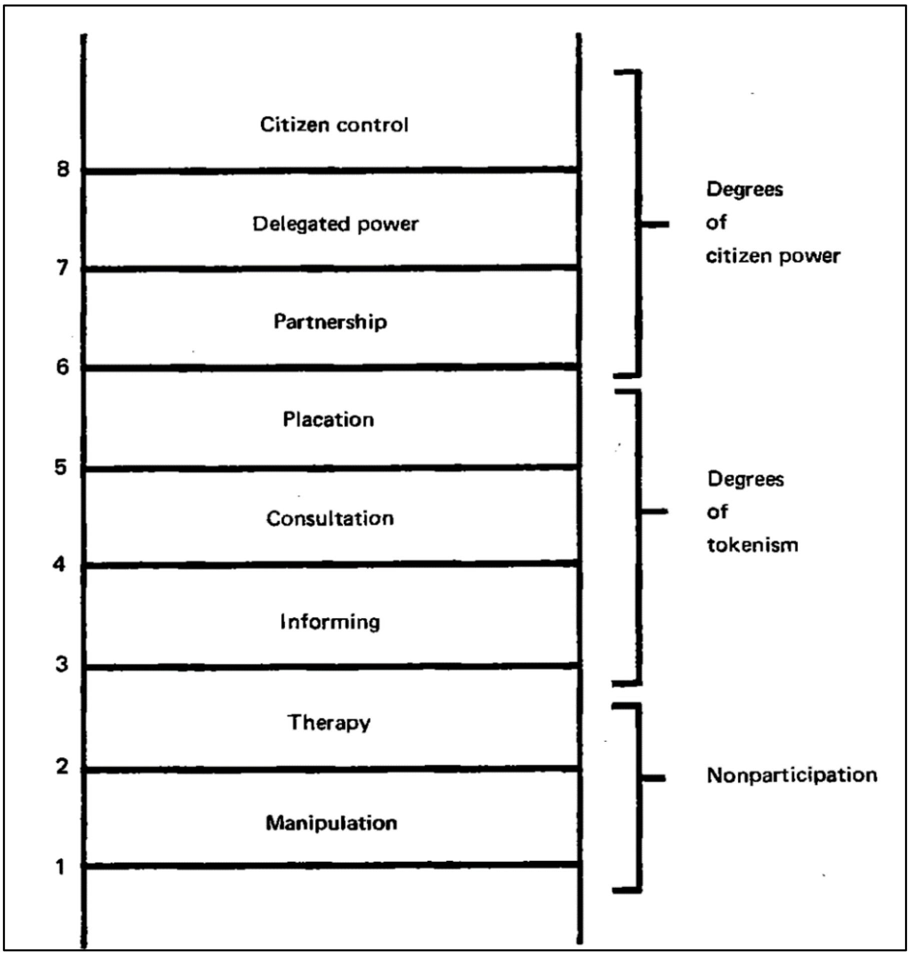

Figure 2. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum for Participation. This model defines different levels of participation based on the public's role, from lower to higher levels of impact on the decision. This is designed to be a global standard of public participation. *Source: IAP2 (2018).*

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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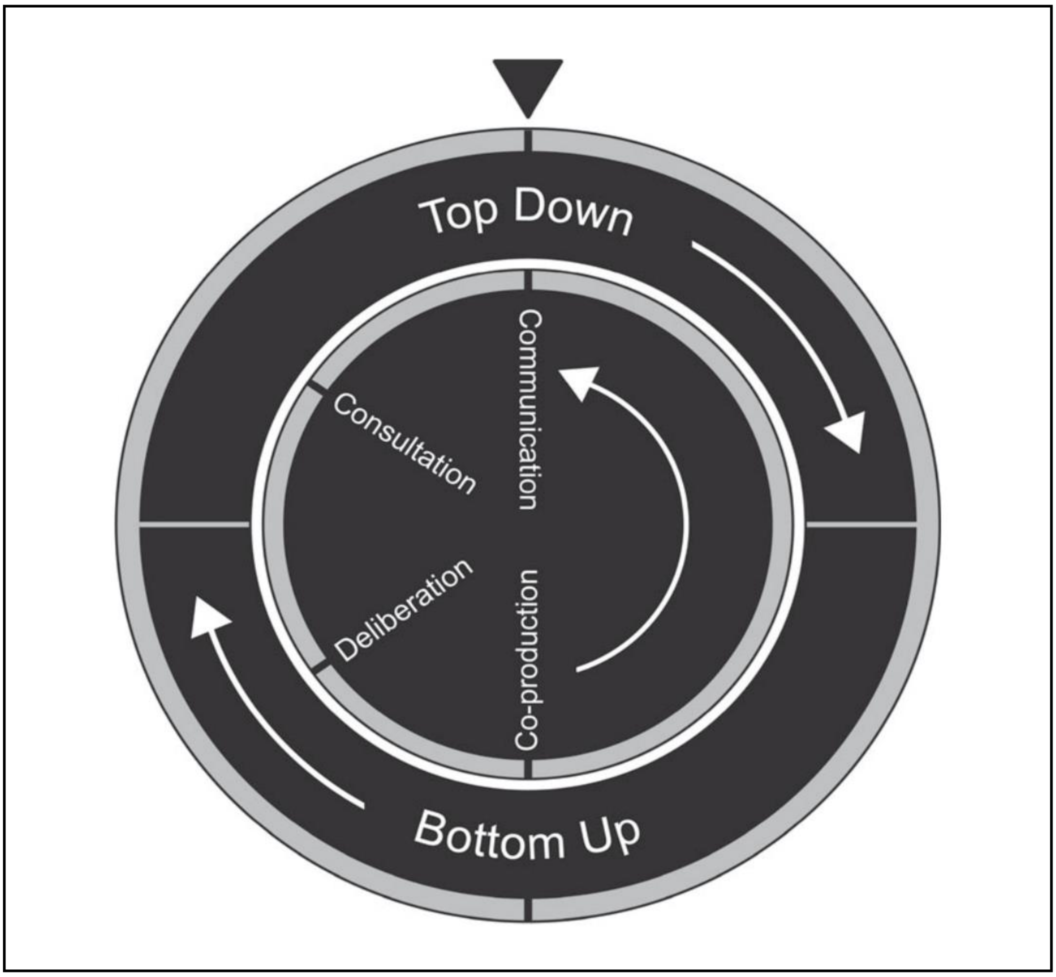
Other models and theories have been developed which further incorporate contextual factors in the design, process, and evaluation of participatory processes (e.g., see Baker and Chapin, 2018; Bell and Reed, 2021, Rijke *et al.*, 2012). These ways of understanding can help us to understand how different engagement processes, methods, and tools are 'fit for purpose' (Rijke *et al.*, 2012; Reed, Vella, *et al.*, 2018b) while considering the role of contextual factors including participatory rationales, organisational/institutional fit, and societal structures (Baker and Chapin, 2018).

One prominent and influential model – underpinned by theory - is Reed *et al.*'s (2018a) *wheel of participation* (e.g., Blake *et al.*, 2018; Cvitanovic *et al.*, 2019; Kahila-Tani *et al.*, 2019; Shackleton *et al.*, 2019; Shrestha *et al.*, 2019; also see Bell and Reed, 2021, for a review of eight key theories and models). According to Reed *et al.* (2018a), the variance in outcomes for participants and/or the natural environment (i.e., whether engagement achieves its intended benefits or succumbs to its risks and pitfalls) depends on the context and purpose in which it is used. For example, they suggest that negative outcomes from engagement can be due to an inappropriate choice of engagement type for a particular purpose or context (Reed *et al.,* 2018a). This theory is grounded in the literature of public and stakeholder engagement in environmental decision-making processes (see Reed, 2008). In their literature review of stakeholder participation for environmental management, Reed (2008) identified eight features of best practice and argued the need to replace a 'toolkit' approach which emphasises selecting the relevant tools and/or methods for engagement, towards an approach which is underpinned by values of empowerment, equity, trust, and shared learning. Another study by de Vente *et al.*, (2016) provided the empirical evidence which was used to underpin the wheel of participation. The authors considered the extent to which context and process design can enable or constrain public and stakeholder engagement and achieve beneficial outcomes for society and the environment, concluding that design factors affected the outcomes of the process more significantly than contextual factors (de Vente *et al.*, 2016).

It is suggested that the wheel of participation is a more appropriate metaphor than Arnstein's ladder because it removes the judgement that higher levels (or 'rungs') of engagement are more valuable than lower levels, arguing that top-down engagement may be as appropriate and effective as bottom-up approaches in some situations (Reed *et al.,* 2018a). The metaphor of a wheel (see Figure 3) is used with inner and outer dials which can be 'spun' to create different combinations of agents (those who initiate/coordinate the process) and processes (modes of engagement). Ultimately, the wheel of participation offers a comprehensive and rigorous alternative to other typologies by enabling users to select any combination of interchangeable engagement types, rather than attempting to characterise different types (or levels) as separate from one another. This model of engagement may be a more pragmatic and workable approach for policymakers and practitioners in particular, especially as it enables those responsible for carrying out engagement to select the most appropriate type of engagement for the purpose and context in which it is needed. However, the wheel of participation has been critiqued for failing to consider the power dynamics which Arnstein and others sought to overturn in their work. For example, Bell and Reed (2021) argue that it is important to meet the normative goal of empowering people to influence decisions that affect their lives.

Figure 3. The wheel of participation. This model and theory defines different types of public and stakeholder engagement. Instead of viewing types of engagement as a hierarchy from low to high levels, the wheel of participation can be used to adapt engagement processes to the purpose and context in which they are needed (see Figure 4 for four contextual factors which can influence effective engagement). *Source: Reed et al. (2018, p. 10).*



The key contribution of Reed *et al*. (2018a) is a theory comprising of four factors that explain much of the variation in the outcomes of engagement processes (i.e., whether engagement achieves more positive or negative outcomes for participants, for society, and for the environment). These four factors (see Figure 4) are:

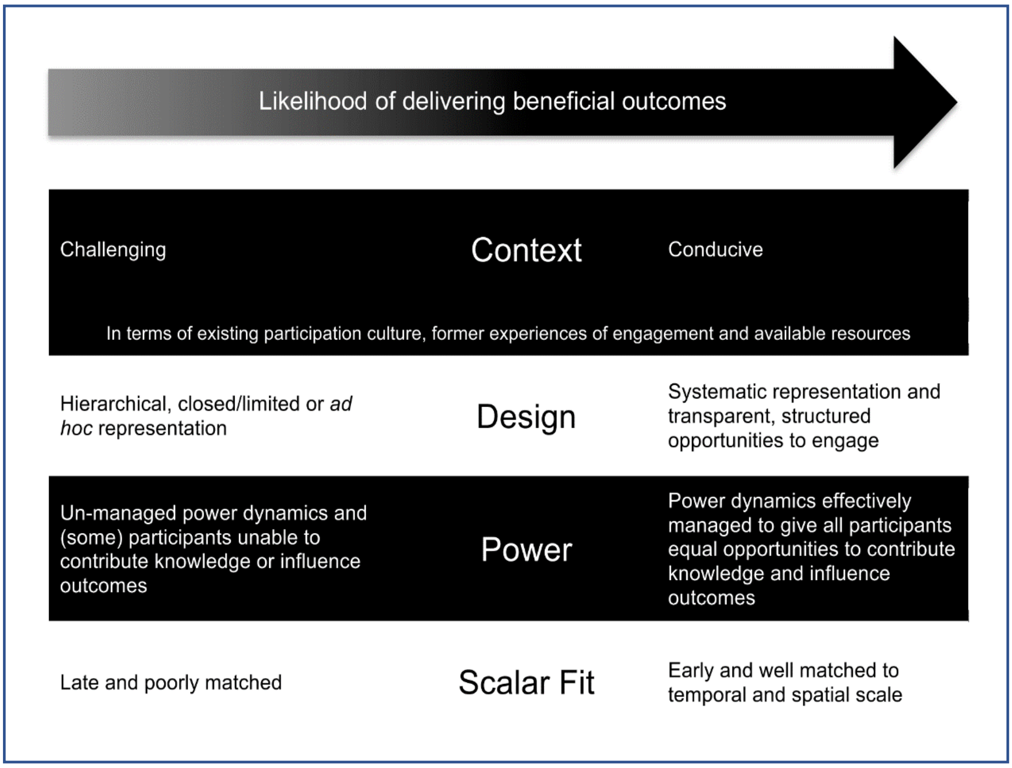
1. Contextual factors including socio-economic, cultural, political, and organisational/institutional contexts. For example, the existence of a participatory culture and former positive and/or negative experiences of engagement, as well as the available resources. These factors are considered to mainly occur at a local level. It is important to take time to fully understand the (local) context in which engagement is carried out in order to determine which type of engagement is most appropriate, and to ensure that the design of the engagement process can be effectively adapted to the context in which it is needed.

2. Process design factors including the design of transparent, representative, and structured opportunities to engage. These design factors can increase the likelihood that engagement will lead to positive and beneficial outcomes. In particular, engagement processes should be inclusive and representative of relevant public and stakeholder interests and should incorporate multiple knowledge types. While the views of all interest groups should be represented in the engagement process, it is important to be realistic that the involvement of all parties may not be feasible or realistic in particular contexts.

3. Power dynamics including the values of participants and their epistemologies (i.e., their ways of constructing knowledge and how they justify their beliefs and opinions). The poor management of power dynamics is one major reason why engagement can fail to deliver its desired outcomes. Professional and skilled facilitation is important for ensuring the effective management of power dynamics, ensuring that participants are given equal opportunity to contribute to the engagement process.

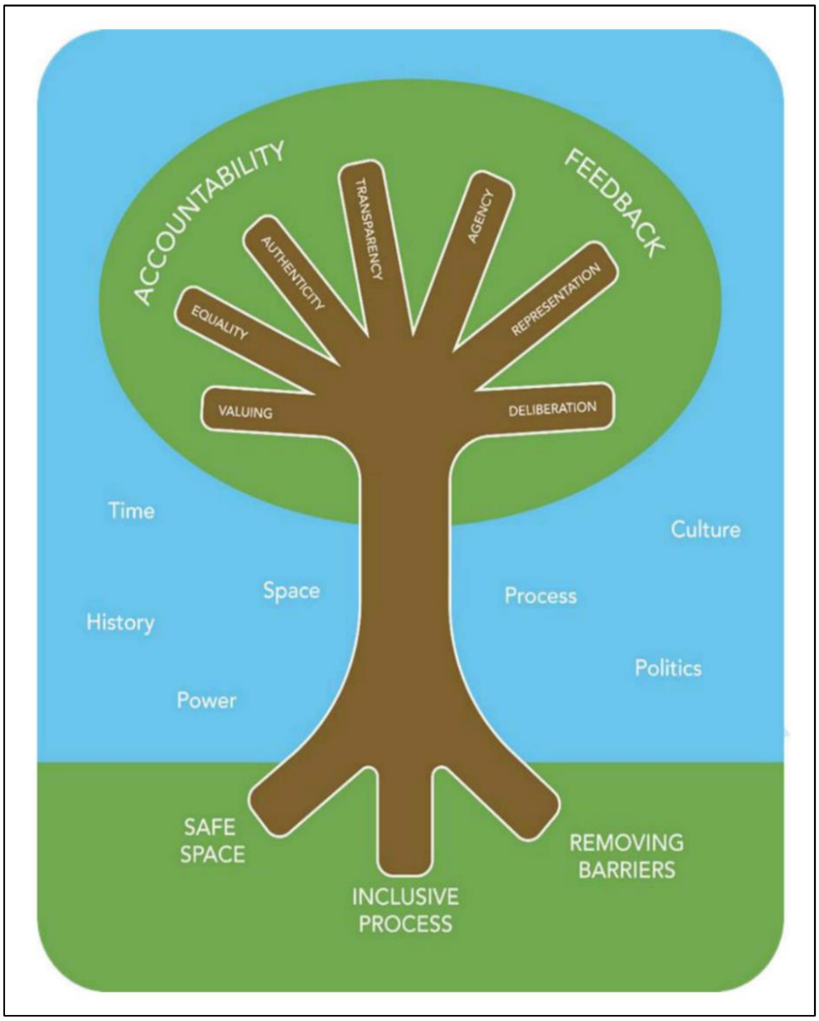
4. Scalar fit including spatial and temporal scales. Contextual factors and values (e.g., people's beliefs and preferences) can change over time, therefore it is important to match the length and frequency of engagement to the goals of the process. Engagement processes also need to be organised and conducted at a spatial scale that is relevant to the issue, for example matching the jurisdictions of authorities and organisations that can tackle the issue.

Figure 4. A theory of participation. The theory helps to explain how the outcomes of public and stakeholder engagement in environmental decision-making processes can be explained by four factors: context, process design, power dynamics, and scalar fit. Source: *Reed et al., (2018 p. 14).*



New models for engagement have been introduced since the wheel of participation. The tree of participation (ToP) model aims to build on the strengths of previous models (including the wheel of participation, Arnstein's ladder, and a selection of other influential participation models) and overcome their limitations (Bell and Reed, 2021). The ToP is grounded in the normative rationale that participatory decision-making should include and empower people to become involved in decisions that affect their lives. However, the key contribution of this model is that it is intended to enable contextual factors to be considered and embedded in participatory processes through a flexible and adaptable approach (Bell and Reed, 2021 p. 11; see Figure 5 for an illustration of the ToP). The next section (2.3.2) provides a brief synthesis of a selection of the models for understanding and implementing effective public and stakeholder engagement, highlighting gaps in current evidence and practice.

Figure 5. The tree of participation. This model incorporates context in participatory processes through a flexible approach. It can be used as check for empowering and inclusive practices for participatory processes, and/or as a set of expectations and demands when engaging members of the public and stakeholder groups in decision-making processes. *Source: Bell and Reed (2021, p. 16).*



2.3.2 Synthesis and gaps in understanding

The review in the previous section includes different theories and models which explain what works for effective engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes (and more broadly). This reveals a complex picture, with each model having different strengths and weaknesses in different decision-making contexts, and it is clear that there is no one-size-fits all approach for effective engagement. There is a plethora of different typologies, models, theories, frameworks, guidelines (and so forth) across different disciplines and areas of practice, many more than could be realistically included in this review. As Bell and Reed (2021) comment, this complexity makes it confusing to know how to select the most effective, inclusive, and empowering models for designing and implementing the engagement process. The evidence indicates that contextual factors strongly influence inputs, processes, and outputs/outcomes of engagement, particularly in terms of the (i) rationales and objectives of the decision-making process, (ii) social and cultural factors, (iii) political and governance factors, including institutional factors, (iv) power dynamics, (v) historical context, (vi) spatial and temporal context, amongst other factors (e.g., Bell and Reed, 2021; BEIS, 2021; Defra, 2022; Reed *et al.*, 2018a). The significance of context cannot be overlooked, and engagement processes must be adapted accordingly. Models and theories for effective engagement which incorporate contextual factors – like the wheel of participation (Reed *et al.,* 2018a) and the tree of participation (Bell and Reed, 2021) – offer useful and pragmatic points for consideration for researchers and practitioners alike who aim to carry out effective, inclusive, and meaningful engagement processes.

However, gaps were identified in these models: both the wheel and tree of participation do not consider how the factors that shape effective engagement can change in digital and remote environments. As explored in the subsequent sections (2.6 onwards), a growing body of literature indicates that these factors may take on new dimensions in digital and remote engagement processes, compared with face-to-face (in-person) engagement. While the two models acknowledge process design factors (including representative, inclusive, and structured opportunities to engage), neither Reed *et al.* (2018a) or Bell and Reed (2021) explicitly mention how methodological choice – in particular digital (remote) and in-person engagement - can influence the process and outcomes of engagement. The wheel of participation (Reed *et al.,* 2018a) was also based on empirical evidence (de Vente *et al.*, 2016) which predominantly considered traditional in-person methods for engagement such as interviews, workshops, focus groups, stakeholder meetings, and some low-tech remote methods for engagement including newsletters and survey questionnaires. While the tree of participation (Bell and Reed, 2021) considers a comprehensive range of factors which can influence engagement, including power relations, justice, and agency, it does not take into account how these factors might play out differently in digital engagement processes. It is important to question the extent to which effective and meaningful engagement can be carried out via digital and online means, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic which highlighted technology-related disparities and brought questions around the ethical use of technology into the foreground (e.g., Bricout *et al.*, 2021; Newman *et al.*, 2021; Robinson, 2021; see section 2.6.2). As both models were conceptualised before the COVID-19 pandemic, it is particularly important to investigate whether or not these models account for digital inequalities and a range of ethical issues, among other considerations.

Although both the wheel and tree of participation account for organisational and institutional contextual factors and acknowledge that engagement needs to be institutionalised to be successful in the long term (e.g., see Reed, 2008), they do not fully consider the range of reasons why the goals of engagement may be at conflict with the structures and cultures of the organisations tasked with carrying out these processes. These limitations are discussed in more detail within the context of section 2.7 in this review.

The next two sections (2.6 and 2.7) explore the literature on digital tools for public and stakeholder engagement, focusing on the benefits and limitations of digital for effective and meaningful engagement (e.g., for more inclusive and accessible decision-making processes). This focuses on key technical and ethical debates, including those emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, to explore the extent to which effective and meaningful engagement can be conducted online.

2.6 Digital tools for engagement

The previous sections have explored the various rationales, benefits, and risks for engagement, as well as the underlying factors that can help us to understand what works. These interlinked factors include contextual factors, process design factors, power dynamics, and scalar fit (Reed *et al.*, 2018a; also see Baker and Chapin, 2018; Bell and Reed, 2021; Burgess and Chilvers, 2006; de Vente *et al.*, 2016). A growing body of literature suggests that these factors may take on new dimensions in digital and remote engagement processes compared to in-person (face-to-face) situations (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Evans-Cowley, 2010; Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). Researchers have investigated the role and influence of technology across multiple disciplines including online qualitative research (e.g., Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017; Longhurst, 2016; Salmons, 2016; Pink *et al.,* 2015) and digital geographies (e.g., Ash *et al.*, 2018a; Ash *et al.*, 2018b). The literature on digital engagement, participatory, and online qualitative methods rapidly expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic, with an explosion of studies exploring the benefits and limitations of switching from in-person to online methods (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2020; Auerbach *et al.*, 2022; Butler *et al.*, 2020; Egid *et al.*, 2021; Falter *et al.*, 2022; Gray *et al.*, 2020; Lobe *et al.*, 2020; Boland *et al.*, 2021; Hall *et al.*, 2021; Marzi, 2021; Muñoz *et al.*, 2021; Sattler *et al.*, 2022; Tremblay *et al.*, 2021; Willis *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, researchers and practitioners alike worked together to produce crowdsourced documents, public blog posts, and share resources on social media to quickly bring together diverse ideas for conducting research during the pandemic (e.g., Gulliford, 2020; Jowett, 2020; Kara and Khoo, 2021; Lupton, 2021; Midgelow, 2020). It is important to note that although it can be tempting to view technologies as novel and exciting, digital participatory approaches have been slowly developing for decades and that this is supported by a well-established body of evidence (e.g., Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Rowe and Gammack, 2004; Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones, 2022).

It is clear that digital technology is continuously transforming participatory and engagement processes in research, policy, and practice (Butler *et al.*, 2020; Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Rawat and Yusuf, 2019; Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). In recent years, national strategies for digital transformation, Levelling Up, and economic growth in the UK have followed a 'digital-by-default' or 'digital first' mantra in line with the Government's aspirations to become a world leader in digital adoption[12] (Cabinet Office, 2012; Government Digital Service, 2017; DLUHC, 2022; DDCMS, 2022). Digital-by-default remains a strong narrative across the public sector from national to local levels. For example, the Digital Leader's Public Sector Innovation Conference (2022) focused on the efficiency, interoperability, and 'limitless potential' of technology and data for building digitally enabled public services, as well as the 'accelerated digital transformation' and 'rapid move towards digital first'[13]. Despite this bold optimism regarding the potential of digital technologies, one key issue is the lack of attention paid to the wider societal implications of rapid and unregulated digital transformation. While national strategies often overlook some important ethical issues regarding digital and data-driven technologies, in contrast, the research indicates that there are significant ethical risks for society including bias and the exacerbation of existing exclusions, injustices, and prejudices (e.g., O'Neil, 2016; Tsamados et al., 2021). Many guidelines, toolkits, and

[12] These strategies have typically focused on increasing economic productivity and streamlining services, for example, the 2012 Government Digital Strategy (Cabinet Office, 2012) demonstrated the potential of public service transformation by rebuilding services to make them 'digital by default', and the 2017 Government Transformation Strategy (Government Digital Service, 2017) aimed to build on this foundation by transforming citizen-facing services, while improving 'digitally-enabled change' to increase efficiency and collaboration across Government departments.

[13] 4th Public Sector Innovation Conference, 8th March 2022, RSA House London. https://digileaders.com/innovation-conference/. The researcher attended this conference as a delegate.

frameworks for engagement also do not sufficiently consider the technical and ethical debates around digital tools and technologies in this context (e.g., recent OECD guidelines for participation includes a limited and insufficient discussion of the challenges and opportunities for digital engagement; see OECD, 2022).

Despite evident drives for more digital engagement and 'digital first', there are still many unresolved questions about the benefits of these technologies and their effectiveness at addressing the goals of participation (Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Köpsel *et al.*, 2021; Manderscheid *et al.*, 2022; McKinley *et al.*, 2021; Robinson and Johnson, 2021; Willis *et al.*, 2021). As identified in section 2.3.2, many prominent and influential models and theories for explaining what works for engagement (e.g., Reed *et al.,* 2018a) do not consider the impact of digital and remote approaches on what works for engagement. Although digital tools have the potential to enhance participation on one hand, technology can cause an array of negative consequences which can lead to the (further) exclusion, marginalisation, and disempowerment of participants. In an increasingly digitised world, it is critical that engagement and other participatory processes remain inclusive (particularly of marginalised groups and individuals), meaningful, and achieve intended positive outcomes (e.g., the benefits listed in section 2.3). While national and international strategies emphasise the importance of digital technologies for enabling effective democratic participation and societal transformations, numerous participation gaps have been highlighted which present barriers to inclusive and equitable decision-making (e.g., White, 2016; these barriers are explored later in section 2.6.2) and pose a threat to just sustainability (Agyeman *et al.*, 2003; Agyeman, 2008; Bennett *et al.*, 2019). The digital world is also marked with considerable power imbalances due to the domination of large technology companies (e.g., Brossard, 2019; Amoore, 2020; Bartlett, 2018; Bernholz *et al.*, 2021; McIlwain, 2020; O'Neil, 2016; Wachter *et al.*, 2020) and it is important to remember that the challenges and opportunities for digital engagement are operating against a backdrop of continuous struggles for a more inclusive, democratic, and sustainable society (Certomà, 2021; McLean, 2019; Mclean, 2020).

2.6.1 A landscape for digital engagement

There is an abundance of digital tools for participatory planning and environmental decision-making. These tools are used for a wide variety of purposes and at different stages in decision-making processes, from problem exploration and scoping, to feedback on proposals and project evaluation (Møller and Olafsson, 2018). They include, but are certainly not limited to, digital participatory platforms (sometimes referred to as DPPs, e.g., see Falco and Kleinhans, 2018b); participatory mapping (including Participatory Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Public Participation GIS, e.g., Brown *et al.*, 2017; Brown, Reed and Raymond, 2020); geo-visualisation and collaboration technologies (Billger *et al.*, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2019); social media, networking, and mobile applications (Napawan *et al.*, 2017; Sinclair *et al.*, 2017); communications technologies (e.g., webinars, videos, and podcasts; see Chivers *et al.*, 2021; Mualam *et al.*, 2022); collaboration tools and systems (e.g., Decision Support Systems, see (Rose *et al.*, 2016); gamification (Koroleva and Novak, 2020; Galeote *et al.*, 2021); open data, information, and e-government (Conroy and Evans-Cowley, 2005; Sieber *et al.*, 2016).

While the aim of this review is not to provide a comprehensive account of a range of participatory technologies and their uses, Table 1 includes a heuristic summary of a landscape of digital tools alongside examples of their uses in various environmental and planning contexts. In wider but related areas, an array of digital tools are used for engagement and participation in planning and development, healthcare, and technological innovation (e.g., see Babelon, 2021; Babelon *et al.*, 2021; Rawat and Yusuf, 2020; Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). In addition, the online global network and crowdfunded repository 'Participedia' (https://participedia.net/) provides a more comprehensive resource of the range of tools available for digital public and stakeholder engagement, as well as broader participatory techniques.

As with public and stakeholder engagement in general, there are a range of different terms and definitions related to digital engagement including 'e-participation', 'online participatory technologies', 'internet-enabled participation', 'geoparticipation', and so forth (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Falco and Kleinhans, 2018b; Le Blanc, 2020; Pánek, 2016; Rawat and Yusuf, 2019). In addition, it is important to note that a distinction is acknowledged between digital and online/web-based tools. 'Online' means that a technology is connected to a computer and connected to the internet, whereas 'digital' can be considered as a format or process, including technology that uses, stores, and processes data or information in the form of digital signals (i.e., digital can be either online or offline, remote or in-person). Another distinguishing feature of these technologies is the timing of message and response, which is typically categorised as synchronous (taking place in real time) and asynchronous (conducted remotely and at different times) (e.g., Salmons, 2016). This thesis focuses on 'digital and remote' engagement (inclusive of online and/or offline, synchronous and/or asynchronous), unless otherwise specified (e.g., when an issue relates to both digital remote and in-person approaches), and/or when referring to the use of a particular related term in the literature. In short, unless otherwise specified 'digital and remote engagement' is used to describe an engagement process which is carried out using digital technologies (which are usually, but not exclusively, online and connected to the internet) and is conducted remotely (i.e., in a digital and/or online space, as opposed to physically and in-person[14]).

There are a variety of ways of categorising digital tools for public and stakeholder engagement along decision-making and project lifecycles (e.g., from the exploration of a problem to the evaluation of process outcomes and outputs). Møller and Olafsson (2018, page 4) offer a categorisation of digital tools from 'leading' to 'enabling' participation, based on Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation. For example, in some situations, social media and other communications technologies (e.g., videos and podcasts) may be more suitable for sharing information with participants and/or exploring a particular issue, and therefore may only serve to inform the public and other stakeholders about a decision (rather than more actively engage them in it). At the other end of the scale, participatory mapping, participatory GIS, and gamification techniques can help to promote more collaborative engagement and the co-production of decision-making processes and outputs. However, there are there are many different understandings of what works for engagement (much more than could be covered in this literature review), with an overabundance of different typologies and models from research and practice. In addition, decision-making and project stages can also vary considerably by discipline, sector, specialism, project type, ambition, goals, and so forth. Indeed, the research suggests that aligning digital tools with particular types and stages of engagement and decision-making processes may not always be the best approach. For example, according to Babelon (2021), digital tools are versatile and can be classified in many different ways, including being adapted to different decision-making processes, project stages, and applications (see also Babelon *et al.*, 2021). Other recent literature suggests that rather than adhering to strict prescriptions of how (and when) they can be implemented, the selection and use of digital tools for engagement (and other participatory processes) can be flexibly aligned to the context and purpose in which they are needed (Kleinhans *et al.*, 2021). This echoes both the wheel and tree of participation models discussed earlier in this chapter (Bell and Reed, 2021; Reed *et al.,* 2018a), which emphasise the importance of considering how the context in which engagement is enacted can influence desired outcomes.

[14] In-person engagement is considered to be conducted in a physical as opposed to virtual environment (which can either include or not include digital technology as part of hybrid and/or digitally mediated approaches). Also see the Glossary.

Table 1. A landscape of digital tools for public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes. *Source: inspired by Hafferty et al. (forthcoming; see Box 1) and evidenced by the literature.*

Digital tools for engagement	Examples	Sources for further reading
Digital participatory platforms (DPPs)	• Feedback on proposals. • Participatory budgeting. • Ideation platforms. • Engagement portals. • Public Participation GIS.	Babelon (2021); Falco and Kleinhans (2018b); Kleinhans *et al.* (2021).
Participatory mapping	• Public Participation GIS (PPGIS). • Volunteered Geographic Information (VGI). • Participatory GIS and community mapping. • Citizen science.	Brown *et al*. (2012, 2020); Haklay (2013); Lynch (1960); Møller and Olafsson (2018); Pánek (2016); Rawat and Yusuf (2019).
Geo-visualisation	• Planning Support Systems. • Digital Twins • Three-dimensional (3D) visualisation and simulation. • Two-dimensional (2D) Geocollaboration. • 3D and four-dimensional (4D) Geocollaboration. • 3D CAVEs.	Billger *et al.* (2016); Kahila-Tani *et al.* *(*2016); Kuller *et al.* (2018); Lovett *et al.* (2015); Panek (2016); Pettit (2005); Smith *et al.* (2019).
Social media, communications software, and mobile applications	• Facebook and Twitter. • Instagram, Flikr. • WhatsApp. • Area-based social media (e.g., Nextdoor). • Project websites. • Videos and podcasts. • Webinars and workshops. • Crowdsourcing apps. • Augmented Reality (AR). • Reporting apps (e.g., ‘311’ services). • Sensor apps. • Mobile apps & mobile-friendly platforms.	Afzalan and Evans-Cowley (2015); Chivers *et al.* (2021); Evans-Cowley (2010); Falco and Kleinhans (2018a); Hall *et al.* (2021); Lobe *et al.* (2020); Marzi (2021); Sinclair *et al.* (2017); Willis *et al.* (2021).
Collaboration tools	• Decision Support Systems. • Team collaboration and networking tools.	Carver *et al.* (2001); Fox *et al.* (2022); Hall *et al.* (2021); Rose *et*

	• Webinars and workshops.	*al.* (2016); Willis *et al.* (2021).
Gamification	• Virtual Reality (VR) and immersive games. • Planning and design simulations. • AR & VGI-based geoparticipation games. • Minecraft, Block by Block. • Metaverse.	de Andrade (2020); Delaney (2022); Hudson-Smith (2022); Galeote *et al.* (2021); Koroleva and Novak (2020); Weedy (2021).
Open data, information, and e-government	• Government and council websites. • E-Government services. • Open data dashboards. • Interactive maps of council services and local amenities. • Open databases (e.g., Ordnance Survey). • Amenities and infrastructure. • Dig Data and AI. • Emails and newsletters.	Rawat and Yusuf (2019); Conroy and Evans-Cowley (2006); Panganiban (2019); Le Blanc (2020).

2.6.2 Technical and ethical debates

This literature review has explored how issues of inclusion, equity, trust, power, and transparency (amongst others) are foundational principles for engagement and other participatory processes (Fiorino, 1990; Stirling, 2006, 2008b). The rapidly expanding body literature on digital engagement suggests that these principles take on new dimensions within digital and remote contexts (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Marzi, 2021; Panchyshyn and Corbett, 2022; Willis *et al.*, 2021). However, there are still many unanswered questions about the benefits of digital tools and their effectiveness at addressing the goals of engagement (Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; also see section 2.3). There is a gap in current knowledge regarding the effectiveness of digital tools for generating beneficial outcomes for engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes: there is a need for more empirical evidence of what works, what does not work, and how digital and remote tools impact who is included (and who is left behind), unequal power relations, the erosion of trust, among other persistent and fundamental issues. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption and implementation of digital technology in the UK and internationally, which has added urgency to the question of whether meaningful and effective engagement can be conducted in remote and digital settings. While digital technology can enhance engagement on one hand, it can (further) exclude, marginalise, and disempower individuals and groups of people on the other.

In addition, although there are a number of studies that consider the effectiveness of digital tools for engagement, with an explosion of new research in this area during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Bricout *et al.*, 2021; Hall, *et al.*, 2021; Marzi, 2021; McKinley *et al.*, 2021; Panchyshyn and Corbett, 2022; Willis *et al.*, 2021), these studies tend to focus on specific aspects of engagement and how they change in digital settings (e.g., inclusivity, trust dynamics, and power relations), improving particular methodologies and articulating best practices. There is an apparent gap in the literature for studies which consider a comprehensive range of contextual factors and dynamics (e.g., those outlined in the tree of participation, see Figure 5). Contributing to the technical and ethical debates around digital tools for engagement, the following sections review the literature which investigates how these technologies can shape the balance of the benefits and pitfalls of engagement processes.

One important (and currently underexplored) question is the extent to which existing models and theories for explaining what works for engagement (e.g., the wheel of participation, Reed *et al.,* 2018a) hold true for digital engagement. To better understand the practical and ethical challenges associated with digital engagement, it is important that theoretical frameworks are applied and developed to account for the processes and outcomes involved (Reed *et al.*, 2018a). For example, Chewning (2018) identified the need for new theories of virtual engagement which considers contextual factors, goals, and motivations (also see Gordon *et al.*, 2011; Gordon *et al.*, 2013). Afzalan and Muller (2018) reflect on existing theory to scrutinise the effectiveness of online participatory technologies in responding to the goals of public participation, questioning how these technologies should be used and classified, how they address specific participation goals, the trade-offs between face-to-face and online participation, and how they can best be integrated into participatory processes. More recently, Willis *et al*. (2021) drew upon deliberative democratic theory to establish the rationales and criteria for deliberative research, concluding that while deliberation online is substantively different from in-person events, it can meet many of the requirements of participatory and deliberative research. When exploring the extent to which theories for engagement hold in digital and remote environments, it is important to remember that engagement is an inherently social and contextual activity inclusive of different power dynamics, socio-cultural factors, political and governance factors, historical context, spatial and temporal context, amongst other factors. Existing theories of engagement (including those outlined in section 2.3) need to be applied, tested, and developed to not only further our understandings of the dimensions of digital engagement processes, but to consider whether these theories sufficiently account for the technical and ethical debates around the use of these technologies. These complex and highly interlinked debates are explored in more detail below, including the following themes: (i) technical issues; (ii) access and inclusion; (iii) power relations; (iv) informality and social interaction; (v) trust and transparency; (vi) privacy and security.

(i) Technical issues

There are a number of technical issues that can impact the quality and reliability of digital engagement processes. The literature highlights various risks and complications including setup and accessibility issues, loss of connection and drop-outs, outdated hardware and/or limited functionality, lack of access to equipment and/or support using it, poor video and/or audio quality, limited broadband signal and/or mobile phone data, low device battery, and so forth (Archibald *et al.*, 2019; Boland *et al.*, 2021; Butler *et al.*, 2020; Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Falter *et al.*, 2022; Hall *et al.,* 2021; McKinley *et al.*, 2021; Rowe and Gammack, 2004). For example, Archibald *et al.* (2019) reported that the majority of their research participants experienced some form of technical difficulty when using Zoom videoconferencing. Technical issues can be particularly problematic when engagement participants (and/or those tasked with carrying out the process) lack the appropriate skills, support, and levels of digital confidence to implement these approaches (Hall *et al.*, 2021; Pham and Massey, 2018; Willis *et al.*, 2021). For example, Pham and Massey (2018) note the technical skills requires to effectively utilise and access online technologies, with large digital skill gaps reported between rural and urban areas (see also literature on the digital divide, e.g., Huggins and Izushi, 2002; Panganiban, 2019; Robinson, 2021). Despite these challenges, digital engagement can enable the development of digital skills, build confidence in utilising technologies, and help to close so-called digital divides (Pham and Massey, 2018). The literature also suggests that technical issues can be overcome (while also helping to develop digital skills and confidence) by careful planning, piloting technologies, and providing training sessions (Marzi, 2021), with some studies suggesting that the shared experience of resolving technical issues helps to build rapport between participants and facilitators of engagement (Archibald *et al.*, 2019b).

(ii) Access and inclusion

Issues relating to accessibility, inclusivity, and equity are fundamental to public and stakeholder engagement (Reed, 2008; Reed *et al*., 2018a), as well as participatory and deliberative processes more broadly (Cass, 2006; Chilvers, 2009; Kindon, 2009; Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Stirling, 2008). For example, Reed (2008) suggested that any stakeholder engagement process needs to be underpinned by a philosophy that emphasises empowerment, equity, trust, and shared learning. By doing so, participants' needs, perceptions, and values must be placed at the centre of participatory decision-making processes, ensuring that they have the power and capability to engage effectively and influence the decision as much as possible. As Evans-Cowley and Hollander (2010) suggest, it is essential that research explores the effectiveness of digital forms of engagement on the inclusiveness of participatory processes, particularly regarding the so-called digital divide. This became particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which amplified existing and future conditions of vulnerability, inequality, and exacerbated systemic shortcomings related to opportunities for virtual engagement (Börner *et al.*, 2021).

Digital tools can make engagement processes more accessible and inclusive, with well-documented benefits for bringing people together, facilitating engagement across geographies and time zones, and reducing the environmental impact of events including the reduced need for travel (Afzalan and Muller, 2018; McKinley *et al.*, 2021; Willis *et al.*, 2021; Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). At the same time, however, digital engagement can also be exclusionary as access to and knowledge of technology is not distributed evenly across populations and is rooted in wider socio-economic inequalities (Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Manderscheid *et al.*, 2022; Pham and Massey, 2018). Technology can result in digital exclusions and (further) marginalise people based on factors such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, disability, education, and income (Bricout *et al.*, 2021; Longley and Singleton, 2009;

Panganiban, 2019; White, 2016). For example, some studies have suggested that government use of online technologies has undermined marginalised and socially deprived communities and empowered more affluent ones, resulting in biased and unjust decision-making processes and outcomes (Graham, 2002; White, 2016). The literature includes various terms to refer to groups and individuals who are 'harder to reach' (e.g., Hurley *et al.*, 2020; Rose *et al.*, 2021), 'seldom heard' (Coenen, 2009), and 'left behind' (White, 2016) by digital engagement and participatory decision-making processes in general. Some of these terms are contested, for example, 'harder to reach' and 'seldom heard' places blame on the public and/or stakeholder groups rather than questioning why decision-making processes and organisations are not easily accessible (e.g., Escobar *et al.*, 2017). In addition, the use of these terms may overlook many of the underlying barriers and inequalities faced individuals and groups, which can be rooted in contextual factors and socio-economic dimensions. Barriers to digital engagement can include technical issues, digital and spatial literacy, and confidence using different tools – for example, some digital tools can be more complicated to use than others and require higher levels of digital, visualisation, and/or skills from participants (e.g., Roche, 2014).

(iii) Power relations

Power relations are a fundamental factor in stakeholder engagement and any other participatory decision-making process (Arnstein, 1969; Chambers, 2006; Colvin *et al.*, 2020; McDermott, 2012; McDermott *et al.* 2013; Reed, 2008; Stirling, 2008a; Webler *et al.*, 2001). Recognising unequal power relations as an intrinsic aspect of public and stakeholder engagement is a key recommendation in a recent review conducted by the Defra Social Science Expert Group (Defra, 2022). As Pain *et al.* (2007) highlight, power relationships are continuously generated, contested, and reinforced in participatory research arenas (also see Pain *et al.*, 2011). Balanced power relations can promote fair treatment of participants, giving them a more equal opportunity to contribute and as such, decisions are more likely to be based on the views and opinions of participants rather than from the top-down (Webler *et al.*, 2001). Uneven power relationships are often recognised as a challenge in participatory and deliberative processes, and it is often recommended that they are managed by skilled professional facilitation (Stirling, 2006). Within the context of increasingly digitised engagement, it is important to understand what works, what does not, who is excluded, and how future practice can tackle issues related to unequal power relations which occur in both online and offline spaces (Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Kleinhans *et al.*, 2015). As Elwood (2002) suggested, the use of digital and software tools can be both empowering and disempowering, which remains a valid and important point amidst contemporary advances in technology (see Rzeszewski and Kotus, 2019).

Some studies suggest that digital and remote techniques can help to flatten unequal power relationships. For example, Marzi (2021) argues that remote participatory video methods can be used as an effective stand-alone method for empowering participants through co-production methods, without the requirement of researchers and participants being in the same space. Research during the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the importance of reconsidering roles, expectations, and relationships in participatory research contexts (Auerbach *et al.*, 2022; Börner, *et al.*, 2021; Marzi, 2021). This can help to empower participants to contribute to the discussion and flatten traditional hierarchies between those coordinating engagement (e.g., researchers, facilitators, so forth) and participants. While the literature generally considers the intrinsic nature of tackling power inequalities during the engagement process (i.e., regardless of the methods used), some studies suggest that in-person methods offer more (or different) opportunities for meaningful engagement compared to digital and remote situations (e.g., Butler *et al.*, 2020; Köpsel *et al.* 2021). Other studies which explore the challenges and opportunities for digital engagement either do not explicitly consider whether power relations play out differently in digital and remote engagement (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Panchyshyn and Corbett, 2022), or note that they did not find different or more unbalanced power dynamics in online compared to in-person processes (e.g., Willis *et al.*, 2021). Whether power dynamics (e.g., between participants and those responsible for carrying out engagement processes) take on new dimensions in digital and remote engagement situations remains a largely underexplored area.

(iv) Informality and social interaction

As suggested by Rowe and Gammack (2004 p. 45), one of the most significant features of virtual engagement mechanisms is restrictions placed on social context cues that are available in face-to-face interaction. Engagement processes consist of information transfers which are situated within social and environmental contexts which can influence who exchanges information with whom, as well as what information is communicated (Rowe and Gammack, 2004). These concerns have been raised for decades and are still relevant today, however, are dynamic and continuously changing as new technologies emerge, develop, and interact with their socio-environmental contexts (Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Hudson-Smith, 2022).

Good quality social interaction is essential for meaningful engagement, deliberation, and fostering rapport between actors. Digital engagement can be perceived – by both participants and chairs/facilitators - to be more structured, awkward, and uncomfortable compared to in-person encounters (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017; Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Boland *et al.,* 2021; Willis *et al.*, 2021). This can be due to an absence of non-verbal cues (e.g., body language and facial expressions), increased risk of digital fatigue, and pressure to have webcams turned on to maintain eye contact, as highlighted by other research into meetings via methods including videoconferencing platforms (Ferran and Watts, 2008; Miller *et al.*, 2017; Shockley *et al.*, 2021). This can result in a more formal environment which is less social and intimate, restricting the in-depth nature and flow of conversation (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017; Falter *et al.*, 2022; Tremblay *et al.*, 2021). As Martínez-Moreno *et al.* (2012) explain, virtual communication and engagement can 'filter a number of contextual cues in the interaction, reduce the social presence of participants, and convey less information richness than a [face to face] alternative' (p. 160; also see Mualam *et al.,* 2022).

(v) Trust and transparency

Trust and transparency are foundational principles for engagement and other participatory processes (Fiorino, 1990; McDermott, 2012; Reed, 2008; Renn *et al*, 1995; Stirling, 2008). If engagement processes are transparent open, and fair (e.g., making a balanced decision considering diverse perspectives), then this can help to increase public and stakeholder perceptions of trust, credibility, and accountability in decisions and decision-making organisations (e.g., Richards, *et al.*, 2004). In the digital age, one key consideration is the extent to which online engagement can foster the development of close and trusting relationships, rapport, and mutual understanding between different actors in the engagement process (e.g., between participants and those responsible for carrying out engagement processes, or among participants themselves). There is a growing body of literature which indicates that trust and transparency take on new dimensions within the context of remote engagement, digital innovation, and social distancing (e.g., Chivers *et al.*, 2021; Hall *et al.*, 2021; Hafferty *et al.,* forthcoming; Ingram *et al.*, 2022; Kindred *et al.*, 2021; Mualam *et al.*, 2022; Panchyshyn and Corbett, 2022; Schwartz-Ziv, 2020; Tong and Chan, 2022).

On one hand, digital tools can enhance trust, transparency, and legitimacy in engagement processes. For example, Afzalan and Muller (2018) provide empirical evidence that online participatory technologies have the potential to be effective at building consensus in communities by cultimating trust, fostering social bonds, and promoting collective action at the local level in spatial planning. Many digial platforms for engagement (e.g., Bang The Table – Engagement HQ, Commonplace, Carticipe, Mapionnaire, CitizenLab, and a range of others) include software features that increase the transparency and accessibility of decision-making processes and the information that they are based on (Falco and Kleinhans, 2018a). For example, Commonplace (an online citizen engagement platform based in the UK) use participatory mapping to ensure that 'every comment made by a member of the community is visible to the community' in acknowledgement that 'transparency is vital in building trust in the planning system' (Commonplace, 2021, page 31). On the other hand, it can be more difficult to foster and maintain trusting relationships with public and stakeholder groups through digital and remote means (e.g., Butler *et al.*, 2020; Börner *et al.*, 2021; Sattler *et al.*, 2022), particularly when there are limited opportunities for spontaneous and informal conversations which are important for building trust (Hall *et al.*, 2021; also see the previous discussion on informality and social interaction). Numerous studies have identified the need to establish trust and transparency with participants before any digital and remote engagement is conducted (Butler *et al.*, 2020; Mandarano *et al.*, 2010; Marzi, 2021; Sattler *et al.*, 2022). For example, Carver *et al.*, (2001) identify constraints that need to be addressed to improve the feasbility of digital engagement, claiming that '[a] high degree of trust and transparency needs to be established and maintained within the public realm to give web-based public participatory processes legitimacy and accountability' (p. 919; also see Mandarano *et al.*, 2010). In some situations, it is important that people to meet face-to-face to establish trust and it can be difficult to replicate this online. For example, Sattler *et al.* (2022) noted that in an online setting, it was difficult to build trust with stakeholders who were 'meeting for the first time' and the 'interaction among them is limited' (p. 68). In a survey of engagement practitioners (Butler *et al.,* 2020), the vast majority (over 94%) stated that in-person engagement enables greater human connections and is more effective at building trust with participants in the long term (p.3).

(vi) Privacy and security

There exists a vast body of related literature on privacy and security issues related to digital engagement (Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Falco and Kleinhans, 2018a; Hall *et al.,* 2021; Hafferty *et al.,* forthcoming); e-participation and e-governance (Le Blanc, 2020; Schossboeck *et al.*, 2016); structural privacy and democracy (Bartlett, 2018; Bernholz, *et al.*, 2021); digital and data ethics (Helbing *et al.*, 2021; Wachter, 2018); the ethics of algorithms and algorithmic decision-making (Amoore, 2020; Tsamados *et al.*, 2021; Wachter *et al.*, 2017); geoprivacy (Ethical Geo, 2021; Kwan *et al.*, 2004; Richardson *et al.*, 2015) and related areas of ethics in online qualitative research (Boland *et al.*, 2021; Gray *et al.*, 2020; Salmons, 2016). Awareness of privacy and security issues have increased in recent years, partly driven by instances of privacy breaches (e.g., on social media, private databases, and during webinars), surveillance and tracking, and concerns over the safe storage and responsible use of data (Le Blanc, 2020). Many of these issues were placed into centre stage during the COVID-19 pandemic with widely publicised privacy debates around contact tracing apps (McCall *et al.*, 2021; Scassa, 2021). Particular concerns for digital engagement include ensuring confidentiality and protecting the anonymity of participants, bias and inaccurate information, data ownership, safe storage, and control over data sharing (e.g., when data is controlled by a third party with different privacy policies) (Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Hall *et al.*, 2021; Lobe *et al.*, 2020).

As this section on digital engagement has demonstrated, digital tools for engagement are complex and have multiple, interrelated, and context-dependent challenges and opportunities. However, the organisations and institutions tasked with carrying out engagement processes may lack the technical and human capacity to address and manage inherent risks, data analysis requirements, privacy and security issues, and other socio-technical challenges that underpin the use of digital tools (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018). The next section explores the importance of organisational barriers for explaining outcomes in engagement, alongside embedding engagement strategies as part of an institutionalised culture.

2.7 Institutionalising engagement

The literature identified that to be successful in the long term, stakeholder engagement processes (regardless of the digital and in-person methods used) must be institutionalised[15] (Baker and Chapin, 2018; Bussu *et al.*, 2022; Hoppe, 2009, 2011; Klerkx *et al.*, 2017; Mackenzie and Larson, 2010; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998; Reed, 2008; Scottish Government, 2022; Sørensen and Torfing, 2017; Wesselink *et al.*, 2011). Despite the fact that engagement has become increasingly embedded in planning and environmental decision-making over the last few decades (e.g., Bulkeley and Mol, 2003; Bussu *et al.*, 2022; Hoppe, 2011; Richardson, B.J. and Razzaque, 2006), the goals, principles, and criteria of participatory processes can conflict with the structures and cultures of the organisations tasked with designing and implementing these processes (Bickerstaff and Walker, 2005; Hoppe, 2011; Wesselink *et al.*, 2011). The use of digital tools (and consideration of the technical and ethical debates explored in the previous section) must be part of an organisational strategy for undertaking effective engagement, if such tools are to ultimately help to deliver sustainable decisions (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2016; Baker and Chapin, 2018).

There have long been concerns about a gap between the rhetoric and the reality of participatory approaches, methods, tools, and principles (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hoppe, 2011), with tensions highlighted regarding the promises and aspirations of organisational decision-making and local stakeholder experiences (e.g., Blake, 1999). Many of the

[15] Institutionalisation is the process by which organisations (including institutions) acquire value and stability. In this thesis, institutionalising engagement is understood as the embedding of principles and practices of participation into existing governance and decision-making structures in such a way that they become the norm, which can sometimes involve an organisational culture change (Bussu *et al.,* 2022; Huntington, 1968; Scottish Government, 2021; also see the Glossary).

challenges and limitations of stakeholder engagement processes are rooted within organisational and wider political cultures (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2016; Escobar, 2021; Lowndes, 2005; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998) and need to be embedded as part of a wider, long-term, and reflexive organisational culture change process (Lachapelle *et al.*, 2003; Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004; Mackenzie and Larson, 2010; Marzano *et al.,* 2017; Hafferty *et al.,* forthcoming; Pallett and Chilvers, 2015; Reed, 2008). As Lowndes *et al.* (2006, p. 559) suggest, organisations are malleable and there is 'a degree of path dependence but actors can shape and bend organisational forces in new directions'. In addition, organisations can be understood as complex, dynamic and continuously changing; they do not exist and evolve in isolation and are externally networked, responsive, and actively co-produced with other phenomena (e.g., other practices, spaces, and bodies) through practice (Pallett and Chilvers, 2015 p. 159). With this in mind, undertaking an organisational culture shift is not a simple task (Pallett and Chilvers, 2013, 2015) and any work to initiate and embed such a shift needs to start with an understanding of the existing rationales for engagement, along with current practices, assumptions, expertise, capacity, capability, organisational/institutional barriers[16], as well as the wider political and socio-economic dimensions of decision-making (see also Baker and Chapin, 2018; Lachapelle *et al.,* 2003; Wesselink *et al.,* 2011).

There is a great deal of literature on participation that deals with improving participatory processes, for example, through enhancing new tools, methods, and articulating best practices (e.g., Falco and Kleinhans, 2018a; Haffetry *et al.,* forthcoming; McCall and Minang, 2005; Nicolosi *et al.*, 2019; Smith *et al.*, 2019; Wilson *et al.*, 2019). However, while methods are an important consideration, their significance can be over-emphasised in both research and practice and their value for explaining the effectiveness of engagement processes has been described as 'overrated' (Wesselink *et al.,* 2011 p. 2689; see also Bierele and Konisky, 2000). It is important for research on effective public and stakeholder engagement to move beyond focusing on improving participatory processes and articulating best practices, towards understanding the underlying factors – including contextual factors, organisational and/or institutional fit[17], and socio-economic dynamics - which help to explain what works. The

[16] It is important to note that the term 'institutional barriers' is sometimes used in the literature to refer to issues experienced in both organisations and institutions (although 'organisations' and 'institutions' are often used interchangeably in the literature, there is a notable distinction: see the Glossary for the definitions used in this thesis). In this thesis, clarity has been added where possible to highlight that these issues can be experienced across all organisation types.

[17] 'Institutional fit' is a term used in the literature (e.g., Baker and Chapin, 2018; Newig and Fritsch, 2009), often to describe factors that are relevant to all types of organisations (not just institutions). In this thesis, clarity is added (unless referring to a specific term used in the literature) to demonstrate that these factors are relevant for all types of organisations (see Glossary).

various opportunities and challenges for engagement can be better understood and explained at a more fundamental level which takes the context and purpose of engagement into account (Baker and Chapin, 2018; Reed *et al.,* 2018a), including diverse rationales, values, expectations, attitudes, capacities, and capabilities which are rooted in organisational settings (Lachapelle *et al.,* 2011; Wesselink *et al.,* 2011).

Although there is a rich and expansive body of literature on public and stakeholder experiences of engagement processes (e.g., Devine-Wright, 2005; Ruming, 2019; Sandover *et al.*, 2021; Webler and Tuler, 2006), besides a few notable exceptions (e.g., Druschke and Hychka, 2015; Escobar, 2021; Lachapelle *et al.*, 2003; Rijke *et al.*, 2012; Wesselink *et al.*, 2011) there remains comparatively less exploration of practitioners' perspectives on the organisational (and other) constraints for carrying out effective engagement. Wesselink *et al.* (2011) highlight a need for more reflexive awareness of the different ways in which engagement (and other participatory processes) are defined, practiced, and implemented within contemporary environmental decision-making, including a 'more realistic assessment of possibilities for changes towards more participatory and deliberative decision-making' (p. 2688). In their study of manager perspectives of public engagement in ecological restoration, Druschke and Hychka (2015) reflect that future research must acknowledge the challenge of institutional constraints and continue to focus on manager (practitioner) perspectives, which must include consideration of failures and limitations as well as successes. More recently, Escobar (2021) identified that the perspective of professionals (e.g., public sector officials and other practitioners) working to institutionalise participatory and deliberative decision-making remained relatively underexplored (with the exception of Bherer *et al.,* 2017; Blijleven and van Hulst, 2021; Blijleven *et al.,* 2019; Cooper and Smith, 2020; Forester, 1999). There is a growing body of literature which emphasises practitioners' perspectives to enrich the dialogue around 'what works' for stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes (Reed, *et al.,.* 2018) including the role of contextual factors, socio-economic dimensions, and institutional fit (Baker and Chapin, 2018).

2.8 Conclusion

This literature review has brought together multiple strands of literature, from within and beyond academic disciplines, to explore what works for public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes. This review also has much broader relevance beyond environmental decision-making spheres. The review has considered different understandings of engagement, claimed benefits and pitfalls, and different models and theories that help to explain outcomes for engagement processes. It has included in-depth consideration of the technical and ethical debates around the use of digital tools for engagement, as well as the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising engagement as part of organisational cultures.

A series of gaps have been identified in the literature which need to be addressed. Firstly, the literature suggests that the principles and criteria of engagement can take on new dimensions in digital and remote situations, so this warrants further investigation. There are unanswered questions about the benefits of digital tools and their effectiveness at addressing the goals of engagement, including the technical and ethical debates around their use, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic when digital inequalities became a pertinent issue. Secondly, there is a current over-emphasis in the literature on developing methods and articulating best practices, and a current lack of understanding of the importance and dynamics of institutionalising engagement. Central to this is the fact that practitioners' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for carrying out engagement is currently underexplored, particularly with regards to the organisational constraints for delivering effective strategies. Thirdly, existing theories and models of engagement (e.g., wheel and the tree of participation; Reed *et al.,* 2018a; Bell and Reed, 2021) do not explicitly and/or adequately consider the role and impact of digital (remote) tools on the engagement process. In addition, the 'wheel of engagement' and others do not consider organisational barriers in sufficient depth; we need a better understanding of these factors to understand what makes engagement work and be effective. Although an overabundance of different models and theories exist (e.g., see OECD, 2022), it would be impossible to consider them all and these models are focused on because they enable contextual factors to be considered and embedded in engagement processes through a flexible and adaptable approach. The wheel of participation is also an influential and highly cited in the literature, and both models are intended to be accessible and relevant to practitioners and other non-academic audiences, which is pertinent to this thesis.

As stated in Chapter 1, the overall aim of this thesis is to understand practitioners' perspectives on what works for public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes, focusing on the UK. This thesis argues that we need to explore unanswered questions about the effectiveness of digital tools for addressing the goals and benefits of engagement. This led to the development of the first research question (RQ1): *'How effective are digital tools for meeting the goals and benefits of engagement?*'. The thesis will also build on the limited literature exploring the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising engagement, which will be delivered through answering the second research question (RQ2): *'What are the challenges for institutionalising engagement and how can they be overcome?'*. Building on these gaps, it will contribute to identified gaps in existing models and theories of what works for effective engagement, specifically the wheel and tree of participation (Bell and Reed, 2021; Reed *et al*., 2018a) but with broader relevance for other models and understandings. Research question three (RQ3) was designed to deliver this: *'Building on the previous two research questions, what contributions can be made to enhance current theories and models which explain what works for effective engagement?*'. Chapter 3 outlines the research design, methodological choices, the role of public and stakeholder engagement in shaping the study, and a discussion of the ethical implications of the research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Box 2. Chapter summary - Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter includes an overview of the:

- Research questions and overall aims.
- Interdisciplinary and participatory approach (including the importance of engaging with non-academic stakeholders).
- Mixed-methods research design including qualitative and quantitative approaches.
- Information about the participant sample of the research, including a short survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews.
- Non-academic stakeholder engagement and dissemination during the PhD and its impact on the research trajectory.
- Challenges encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, changes and adaptations made, and how important lessons learnt were shared.
- Ethical considerations which occurred during the research process, including reflections on the positionality of the researcher, the implications of moving research online during the pandemic, the benefits and challenges of doing an interdisciplinary and participatory PhD, potential risks to privacy and security (and how they were mitigated).

3.1 Introduction

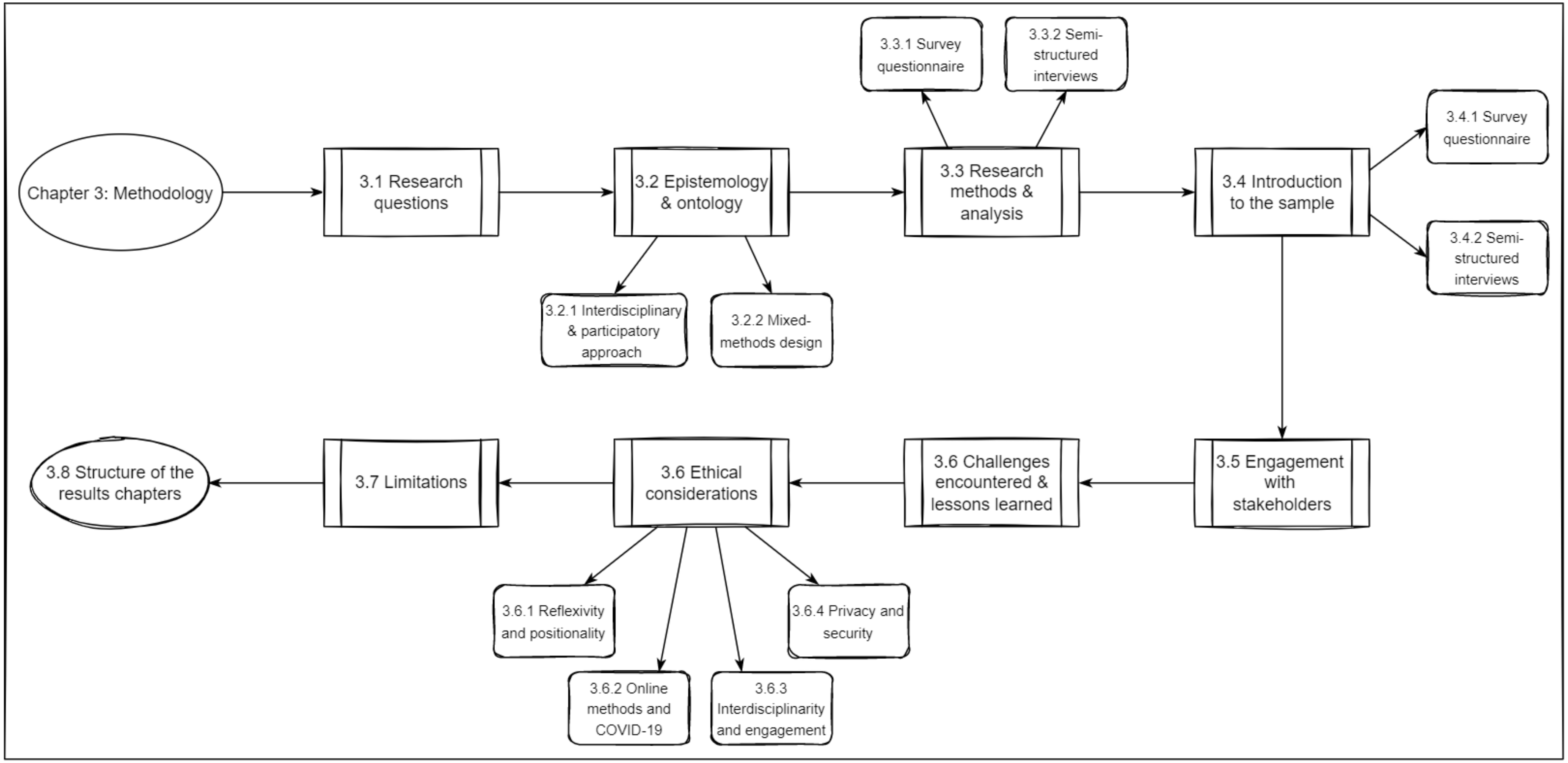
The literature review (Chapter 2) outlined the range of concepts which have influenced this research which related to the benefits and goals of engagement, digital tools for engagement, and institutionalising engagement. Grounded in the literature, three research questions were formed to explore these concepts within the context of the research aims (see section 3.2).

This chapter outlines the research design, including the justification for the methodological choices that were made, how potential limitations were minimised, the importance of stakeholder engagement and dissemination, and a discussion of the ethical implications of the research. This thesis employed a mixed-methods approach drawing on a short survey questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews with practitioners and practice-enablers. In doing so, it aimed to produce detailed insights into the effectiveness of digital tools for stakeholder engagement, as well as insights into more fundamental (i.e., relevant to all engagement processes regardless of the methods) organisational factors which can enable and/or constrain effective engagement.

The research questions and aims evolved as a result of engaging with non-academic stakeholders (see section 3.5) which involved testing and adapting the questions and aims with interest groups and potential beneficiaries of the research, both directly with stakeholders and as the researcher's practical and applied knowledge grew. This directly led to changes in the research, including the introduction of a new research question (RQ2). The research approach was also agile and adaptive during the COVID-19 pandemic (section 3.6 provides an overview of key challenges and lessons learned).

A visual overview of this chapter is provided in Figure 6, including a conceptual background to the interdisciplinary and mixed-methods approach (section 3.2), research methods and analysis (section 3.3), an introduction to the sample (section 3.4), engagement with non-academic stakeholders and its influence on the research (section 3.5), challenges encountered and lessons learned (section 3.6), and an in-depth consideration of the ethical implications (section 3.7), the limitations of the methodology (section 3.8) and an outline of the structure of the results chapters (section 3.9).

Figure 6. Overview of methodology chapter structure. Source: original diagram by the author.



3.2 Research questions

The overall aim of this PhD research is to investigate practitioners' perspectives on what works for stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes, within a UK context. More specifically, this thesis aimed to explore the effectiveness of digital (remote) tools for stakeholder engagement, focusing on the technical and ethical debates around their use. The research also considered the more fundamental factors which can influence the effectiveness of engagement (relevant to digital and non-digital approaches), focusing on the challenges and opportunities experienced at an organisational level. The focus of the research is on the perspectives of practitioners and practice-enablers (sometimes collectively referred to as 'practitioners' in this thesis) responsible for carrying out engagement within their organisation (sometimes referred to as 'engagers').

The focus of the research responded to several gaps identified in the literature (see Chapter 2). There are still many unresolved questions about the benefits of digital tools and their effectiveness at meeting the goals of engagement (see RQ1). At present, there is limited understanding of the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising engagement (see RQ2). Building on the previous two gaps, existing models and theories of engagement do not adequately account for how engagement processes may take on new dimensions in digital and remote environments, nor consider organisational (including institutional) barriers in sufficient depth (see RQ3).

To explore the gaps identified in the literature review and to address the needs of potential users and beneficiaries of the research, the following three research questions were proposed and used to design the research strategy:

> **RQ1**: How effective are digital tools for meeting the goals and benefits of engagement?
>
> **RQ2:** What are the challenges for institutionalising engagement and how can they be overcome?
>
> **RQ3:** Building on the previous two research questions, what contributions can be made to enhance current theories and models which explain what works for effective engagement?

The first research question is addressed in empirical chapters 4 and 5 (where chapter 4 is a short bridging chapter between the methodology and the empirical results, and chapter 5 includes the in-depth qualitative data). The second research question (which is addressed in chapter 6) emerged during the research process through engagement with non-academic stakeholders, alongside the researcher's developing knowledge of engagement in practice (see section 3.5). During the data collection and analysis phase, research participants introduced common themes regarding organisational constraints for engagement. On reflection of this emerging theme and the gaps in the literature, it was decided that further exploration of this theme would make an interesting and valuable contribution to the existing evidence base. In particular, current models and understandings for best practice engagement do not consider organisational barriers in sufficient depth. Research question two was designed to contribute to this current gap in understanding.

The third and final research question was designed to emerge from, and build upon, the findings of the first and second research questions. It is intended to make conceptual contributions by addressing gaps identified in existing models and theories that help explain the (positive and/or negative) outcomes of engagement. Building on the empirical results chapters, RQ3 is addressed within the context of the wider literature in Chapter 7. The conceptual contributions made by addressing RQ3 are then reiterated in the concluding chapter (Chapter 8).

3.2 Epistemology and ontology

This thesis adopted pragmatism as an ontology and worldview for social research, which involves drawing from philosophical concepts of enquiry (e.g., Dewey, 1916) to focus on *what works* and the politics of knowledge (Morgan, 2014; also see Lohse, 2017; Weaver, 2018). This approach recognises the diverse perspectives and approaches in social research, increasing the flexibility with which research can be conducted within relevant philosophical contexts (Elwood and Cope, 2009) and emphasising the practical outcomes and utility of research in the real world. In this research, pragmatism enabled the researcher to integrate multiple methods and disciplines, choosing the methods and techniques which were best suited to the research problem (Creswell, 2009) and adapting the research design to the needs of potential users and beneficiaries of the research. This approach also encouraged the researcher to engage with current real-world problems and collaborate with diverse stakeholders, ensuring that the research was as relevant, useful, and timely to the needs of those interested and affected by the research. Ultimately, taking a pragmatic worldview to social research helped the researcher navigate the complexities of conducting an interdisciplinary, participatory, and mixed-methods research project that was action-oriented and focused on generating real-world impact.

Participation was embraced as an epistemology throughout (and beyond) the research process. Participation as an epistemology recognises that knowledge is socially constructed and subjective, viewing reality as a as a co-creation between researcher and participant, and emphasising that 'truth' is not static but continuously emerging from relationships and lived experiences of the world (Reason, 2007), which can include combining forms of activism with knowledge production (Giri, 2006). More specifically, this research was inspired by Participatory Research (PR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches (e.g., Kindon et al., 2007) that aim to actively involve participants throughout the research process and are characterised by collaboration, shared decision-making, the co-creation of knowledge, and a focus on achieving transformative societal change. This broadly encompasses research conducted by, with, and for people affected by a particular problem, which takes place in collaboration with academic researchers and seeks to democratise knowledge production while fostering opportunities for empowerment (Kindon *et al.,* 2008). The approach taken throughout this PhD research is in contrast to an extractive and top-down approach to research in which participants are treated as passive subjects rather than active partners in the research process, and where their role is to provide data to meet the researchers' needs rather than their own needs and priorities.

Participatory and action-oriented research approaches lend themselves particularly well to interdisciplinary research which aims to understand people's relationships with, accounts of, and interactions with, spaces, places and the environment (Kesby et al., 2007; Kindon et al., 2007; Kindon *et al.,* 2008; Pain, 2004; Pain *et al.,* 2011). As highlighted by Fazey *et al.,* (2018; also see Guido *et al*., 2021), action-oriented research, which involves integrating multiple types of knowledge, and prioritises individual and social learning, is essential for tackling global sustainability and environmental issues and for achieving transformative change. Adopting participation as an epistemology enabled the researcher to prioritise the inclusion of diverse perspectives throughout the research process, moving beyond extractive data collection to foster meaningful engagement and including stakeholders as active agents in shaping the research design and outcomes. Section 3.2.1 provides more detail on the interdisciplinary and participatory (transdisciplinary) approach embraced by this research.

3.2.1 Interdisciplinary and participatory approach

Environmental social science research is often interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary and employs a variety of methods to develop new knowledge (Orlove *et al*., 2020; Reed, 2008). This thesis draws on multiple academic disciplines including geography, ecology and conservation, science and technology studies, sociology, political science, philosophy and digital ethics. It is widely recognised that interdisciplinary research and practice is essential to address 'wicked' environmental challenges (IPCC, 2022; UNFCC, 2022). In addition, interdisciplinarity is required to address tensions between the abstract theories of participation and the deployment of participatory interventions in 'real world' settings (Hügel and Davies, 2020). Tackling complex environmental issues requires decision-making which embraces a diversity of knowledge and values from multiple stakeholders -the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report identifies that considering interdisciplinary information, alongside local knowledge, and practical expertise, is essential for effective ecosystem-based adaptation (IPCC, 2022 p. 87).

Interdisciplinary, participatory, and multi-stakeholder research is increasingly advocated and implemented to further understandings of global environmental issues, identify holistic solutions, and facilitate implementation (Fazey *et al.*, 2014; Holley, 2015). As such, participatory, cooperative, and/or bottom-up approaches have been increasingly sought after and embedded into national and international strategies for policy and practice (IPCC, 2022; Reed, 2008; Scottish Government, 2022). These approaches are also becoming increasingly prevalent in doctoral studies and research more broadly (e.g., Holley, 2015; Strengers, 2014), for example the ESRC is committed to supporting an enhanced culture of interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and collaborative research to respond to the most pressing research challenges(ESRC, 2022a, 2022b).

As discussed in the literature review, the use of participatory methods has a rich history and has expanded globally over geographic regions, across academic disciplines, and in policy and practice (Askins and Pain, 2011; Burns et al., 2022; DeLyser and Sui, 2014; Gergen and Gergen, 2014; Kindon, 2010; Pain and Francis, 2003; Pain and Kindon, 2007). This thesis is participatory in terms of its aims and approach: (i) it sought to explore and enhance participatory methods for environmental decision-making through its focus on engagement, and (ii) it employed a participatory approach involving continuous engagement with interest groups, potential users and beneficiaries of the research. Section 3.5 outlines the non-academic engagement and impact-focused activities which were undertaken throughout the research, and section 3.7 includes some reflections on the ethical implications of this process.

While this thesis is framed as interdisciplinary and participatory, the project initially aspired to follow a transdisciplinary approach (Chammas *et al.*, 2020; Fazey *et al.*, 2018; Harris and Lyon, 2014; OECD, 2020). Transdisciplinarity[18] is defined by the inclusion of non-academic stakeholders in the process of knowledge production (Rigolot, 2020), while developing a collective understanding of complex and multi-faceted issues across disciplinary boundaries (Brown et al., 2010; Pretorius, 2015; Darian-Smith and McCarty, 2016). Transdisciplinary

[18] A transdisciplinary approach is complementary to, but distinctive from, 'multidisciplinary' which suggests a purposeful combination of different disciplines with no necessary overlap, and 'interdisciplinarity' which seeks to find common ground between two (or more) disciplines, i.e., using the methods and theories of one discipline to inform others.

research creates space for free thinking and a more holistic, flexible, and adaptable approach to tackling real-world issues (Blassnigg and Punt, 2013; Gasper, 2010). However, the extent to which the project was transdisciplinary was constrained in several ways: (i) the extent to which the research achieved participatory goals was constrained by available time and resources, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic (see section 3.7.2; also see O'Donovan et al., 2022); (ii) although this project involved stakeholders and participants at multiple stages of the research process (see section 3.5), their involvement was for a specific purpose that was defined by the researcher (e.g., to inform the research questions and potential outputs) and the decision-making power ultimately lied with the researcher (it is important to be reflective and evaluate transdisciplinary research including the empowerment of stakeholders and other participants; see (Steelman *et al.* 2021); and (iii) the findings and knowledge produced was ultimately the researcher's own interpretation of the data captured, and research participants were not involved in the evaluation of results (Steelman *et al.,* 2021).

Despite these constraints, the research remained partly transdisciplinary for three core reasons. Firstly, transdisciplinarity focuses on problems and problem-solving, and so is concerned with the practical application of knowledge for tangible, real-world challenges (Darian-Smith and McCarty, 2016; Fazey et al., 2018; Harris and Lyon, 2014). The overall aim of this thesis is to produce problem-focused, action-oriented knowledge about what works for stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes, in order to generate outputs which are relevant, useful, and accessible to practitioners and practice-enablers. Secondly, transdisciplinary research explores the construction of knowledge and its links to specific worldviews, ideologies, and cultural biases (Darian-Smith and McCarty, 2016). This study predominantly draws from human geography and environmental planning literature, as well as from a range of other disciplines, which are inherently inter- and/or transdisciplinary and have much to offer to new ways of theorising the environment (and human-environment relations) by bringing together multiple disciplinary and non-academic perspectives. Disciplines like human geography are highly complementary to a transdisciplinary and transformative approach to research due to its comprehensive, adaptable, and integrative nature (Pretorius and Fairhurst, 2015). Thirdly, transdisciplinarity can be considered beyond its theoretical imperatives as a 'way of being' (Rigolot, 2020), in that it is inseparable from personal life and extends beyond the professional activities of a researcher. As such, many researchers – particularly radical, critical, and activist scholars – argue that research must remain useful beyond the so-called Ivory Tower (e.g., Fuller and Kitchin, 2004; Taylor, 2014). For example, while participatory theory promotes ideals of inclusion, equity, and transparency (see Chapter 2), it is problematic when these values are not applied to the process of knowledge creation itself (Asenbaum, 2022). These participatory values were personally held by the researcher and incorporated (as much as possible) into the design and process of the research, for example, section 3.5 describes how engagement with non-academic stakeholders was embedded throughout (and played a key role in shaping) the trajectory of the research, and section 3.6 includes challenges encountered, how these were overcome, and how the learnings were shared.

3.2.2 Mixed-methods design

There was both conceptual and pragmatic rationale for adopting a mixed methods design in this research. Mixed-methods research is a well-established and widely applied approach that aims to bridge the gap between quantitative and qualitative approaches by integrating multiple epistemological and methodological approaches to enhance the overall strength of the study, rather than conducting a single approach in isolation (Baškarada and Koronios, 2018; Brown *et al.*, 2017; Collins *et al.*, 2006; Cope and Elwood, 2011; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017; Ivankova et al., 2006; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007; Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007; Tashakkori and Teddie, 2003; Teddlie and Yu, 2007; Terrell, 2012; Timans *et al.*, 2019; Sui and DeLyser, 2012).

This PhD research employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2017; Ivankova *et al.*, 2006), which is a two-phase design that aims to explain and enhance the results of quantitative data analysis with a more in-depth qualitative phase. More specifically, the research utilised a follow-up explanations model (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017) which involved the use of qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews; see section 3.3.2) to both clarify and expand on the results of the quantitative analysis (a survey questionnaire; see section 3.3.1). Figures 7 and 8 illustrate this follow-up approach. The quantitative stage of this research was designed to provide a 'snapshot' into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement and to recruit participants for the qualitative phase (see Chapter 4). The qualitative stage was given more weight in this approach (see emphasis in Figure 8) and enabled the collection of in-depth, nuanced, and contextualised information about practitioners' perspectives and experiences. One core benefit of a sequential and follow-up explanations mixed-methods approach is that it creates space to place emphasis on either the quantitative or qualitative stage. This suited the pragmatic and participatory approach to the research which aimed to be agile and responsive to meeting the needs and priorities of non-academic stakeholders (see section 3.5).

Figure 7. Overview of sequential mixed-methods approach and rationale. *Source: original diagram by the author.*

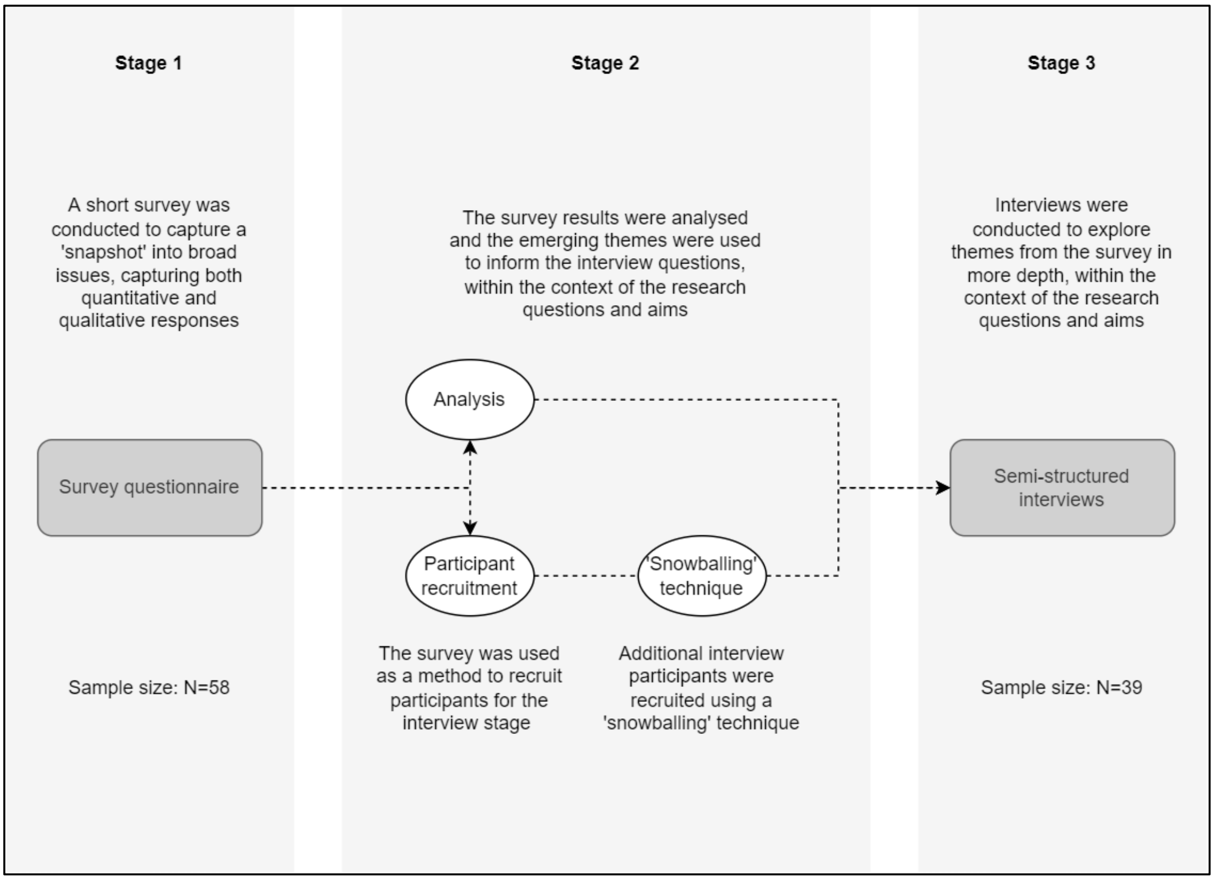
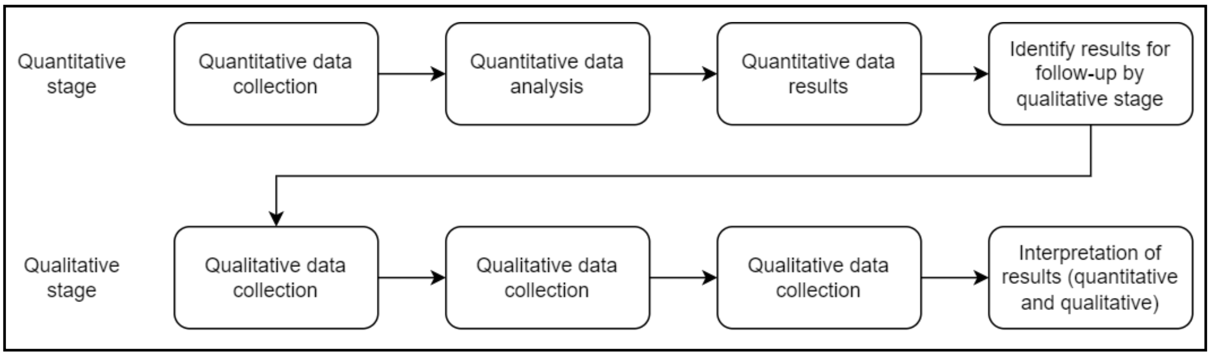


Figure 8. Research design. *Source: diagram inspired by Creswell and Plano Clark, (2017) and elaborated by the author.*



The researcher often took on the role as a participant observer at multiple stages in the mixed-methods design (Figures 7 and 8), which facilitated and enhanced the methods used. This shaped data collection and analysis, playing a central role in the participatory and action-oriented research (see section 3.5) by enabling a deeper understanding of participants' views, experiences, needs and priorities through immersion in the research setting (e.g., Hockey and Forsey, 2020; Kawulich, 2005). Fostering a deeper understanding the research context and participants also helped the researcher navigate unexpected challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (section 3.7), ensuring the research was adaptable in responding to the observed issues facing participants and stakeholders. Observation was conducted online (see Hine, 2008 and 2017 for a critical discussion) and included both attending and participating in relevant webinars and conferences, podcasts, observing within online communities on social media using relevant hashtags (Twitter, LinkedIn), and during online interviews with practitioners. **Appendix A** provides a more detailed account of the activities and events that the researcher engaged with during the research process, which helped to promote a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the research setting and participants.

Acting as a participant observer during the research process helped shape the data collection and analysis in a number of ways. Actively engaging with engagement practitioners both before (e.g., via social media and online events) and during the online interviews helped to provide a valuable opportunity for building trust and rapport with research participants. For example, care was taken to encourage informal conversation, actively listening while swapping stories and experiences, and sharing honest reflections about engagement in research and practice. Observing also helped the researcher to access privileged information about organisations and practitioner perspectives, which enabled a deeper understanding of the decision-making structures, institutional norms and challenges related to the organisations included in this study (this is reflected on in more detail in section 3.7). Accessing privileged knowledge about organisations and practitioners' perspectives, combined with the first-hand observation of relevant issues and online discussions, uncovered rich and contextualised understanding about engagement policy and practice in the UK. This directly uncovered unexpected insights that were not anticipated at the start of the research process, which helped shape the analysis stages and ultimately led to the introduction of a new research question (RQ2). Finally, observing and interacting with participants helped the researcher to adopt a continuous process of reflexivity throughout the research process while maintaining a sense of self-awareness, reflecting on personal biases and assumptions. This reflexive stance helped to highlight many of the issues explored later in this chapter in section 3.7.

3.3 Research methods and analysis

The mixed-methods approach (see Figures 7 and 8) involved the following methods that were conducted using online and remote techniques:

- Survey questionnaire of 58 practitioners and practice-enablers who were currently (i.e., at the time of survey distribution) involved in carrying out engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes. The literature review informed the design of the survey and therefore helped to triangulate the methods.

- 39 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with practitioners and practice-enablers who were currently involved in carrying out engagement in planning and environment decision-making processes. This included UK government departments, non-departmental public bodies, research and education, charities and not-for-profits, local authorities, and software companies.

These methods were selected to compliment and inform each other and to fully explore the research questions. The researcher utilised the surge in resources shared for moving research online during the pandemic including blog posts, crowdsourced guidance, academic papers, and social media threads (e.g., Jowett, 2020; Lupton, 2021; Kara and Khoo, 2020; UTS, 2021). This prompted the researcher to identify and test out a variety of digital tools for research productivity and dissemination (see Appendix A), which helped to facilitate the research process and its switch to virtual methods, while also enabling the researcher to connect with others who were undergoing similar adaptations (also see sections 3.6 and 3.7.2).

3.3.1 Survey questionnaire

The semi-structured survey questionnaire was launched using Jisc Online Surveys during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was open from the 8th June 2020 to the 24th August 2020 and collected 58 responses. The purpose of the survey was to produce broad insights into an unfamiliar and rapidly changing research area and to recruit participants for the qualitative stage of the research. The survey questions were informed by the literature and the researcher's own observations and reflections on the changing landscape of engagement during the pandemic. It sought to capture the following information: i) background information about the participants, including organisation type and areas of specialism; ii) the usual stakeholder engagement that participants were involved in (i.e., before the pandemic); iii) the impact of the pandemic on stakeholder engagement; and iv) any topics, comments, and ideas that the participants had about issues relevant to the research. The survey concluded with an open-ended question: *'Are there any important topics of questions you feel that this research project could investigate?'*. The aim of this question was to explore the areas which participants felt were most important to explore, to help inform the later stages of the research. Participants were given the opportunity to enter their contact details for the qualitative (semi-structured interview) stage of the research.

Participants gave consent via the online survey form and were provided with an information sheet for the project via a Google Docs link. The survey questions (including the information sheet and consent form) are available in Appendix B.

The survey was designed to be short (5 minutes completion time) and was shared on social media (Twitter, LinkedIn) and via email. The researcher also published two blog posts with non-academic stakeholder organisations who were interested in the research[19,20] which helped to broaden the network of contacts made, promote the research project, and to recruit participants (one post contained a link to the survey).

The quantitative parts of the survey were analysed using SPSS and the qualitative open-ended question using NVivo 12. The qualitative analysis involved creating an initial set of nodes (themes) based on themes emerging from the data, guided by reflection on the overarching research questions and survey questions. The purpose of conducting this analysis was to produce broad themes which, combined with reflection on the literature, were used to inform the questions asked in the interviews (see section 3.3.2). The nodes from the survey (which helped to frame the qualitative interview questions) are shown below:

Theme 1.1 Accessibility and inclusion

- Digital inclusions.
- Digital exclusions.

Theme 1.2 Participant experience

- Understanding and adapting to the needs of different stakeholders.

Theme 1.3. Quality of knowledge and interaction.

- Impact of digital on quality of engagement, e.g., knowledge produced.

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[19] Hafferty, C. (2020a) 'Public and stakeholder engagement, Covid-19, and the 'digital explosion': are we heading towards a more 'blended' approach?' [Guest blog] Grasshopper Communications UK. 27th July. Online at: http://www.grasshopper-comms.co.uk/blog/2020/7/23/guest-blog-digital-explosion-are-we-heading-towards-a-more-blended-approach [the original link has since expired]; https://caitlinhafferty.blogspot.com/2020/08/public-and-stakeholder-engagement-covid.html [active link re-posted on the researcher's personal blog, last accessed 21.07.2022]. Also see Appendix A.

[20] Hafferty, C. (2020b) 'Blending online and offline community engagement' [Guest blog] Commonplace. 6th October. Online at: https://www.commonplace.is/blog/blending-online-and-offline-community-engagement. Also see Appendix A.

Theme 1.4. Hybrid engagement and best practice.

- Mixed-methods ('hybrid') and mixed data (qual + quant).
- Key considerations for future best practice.

Chapter 4 includes the findings of the survey analysis. The purpose of Chapter 4 is to provide information which bridges between the methodology chapter and the subsequent qualitative results chapters (Chapters 5 and 6), including an introduction to the topic and key themes which were explored in more depth in the 39 in-depth interviews.

3.3.2 In-depth semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interviews aimed to build on the knowledge obtained through the survey and literature review. The interview information sheet and consent forms are available in Appendix C, and the interview question guide is available in Appendix D. The full list of interview participants is included in section 3.4.

The interviews enabled an in-depth understanding of diverse perceptions and experiences of digital tools for stakeholder engagement. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions (e.g., Hopf, 2004; Qu and Dumay, 2011). The interview question guides (Appendix D) were informed by the literature review and the survey results (an open-ended question in the survey which asked participants about topics which they felt were important to be explored in the research, see the previous section and Chapter 4). The interview questions were designed to serve as prompts to guide conversations with participants and help ensure that all topics were covered. The structure of the interviews enabled participants to talk freely about the issues which were most important to them (e.g., Longhurst, 2009; Krogh, 2011).

Thirty-four interviews were undertaken with practitioners and practice-enablers between June-September 2020, with an additional five interviews undertaken in March-April 2021 – so a total of 39 interviews were conducted (see section 3.4). Here, practitioners were considered as those who are actively engaged in their profession or discipline (including researchers), and practice-enablers those who work to share, reinforce, or expand the work and impact of practitioners (including researchers). Participants broadly included people who were involved in carrying out engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes (see section 3.4 for an introduction to the sample).

Interview participants were recruited through the survey and a 'snowballing' technique (Parker *et al.*, 2019). 27 out of the 39 interview participants had also completed the survey (completion of the survey was requested but not compulsory). The snowballing technique enabled participants to be recruited through the researcher's networks, facilitated by the engagement activities undertaken during the PhD research (including publishing blog posts, webinars, podcasts, and reports; see section 3.5 and Appendix A). To briefly illustrate an example of how this was done, following the publication of a blog post the researcher was contacted via social media by an interested practitioner. This practitioner not only participated in an interview and helped to establish connections with other potential interviewees in their network, but also offered the researcher opportunities to further disseminate the research and call for participants (this cyclical and continuously evolving process is reflected on in section 3.7.1).

Initially, 34 interview were conducted to explore RQ1 (*How effective are digital tools for meeting the goals and benefits of engagement?*). An additional 5 interviews were undertaken at a later date because an opportunity arose to explore a specific theme which emerged from earlier analysis. Some additional questions were asked in these interviews to capture organisational issues in more depth (see Appendix D) and the consent form (Appendix C) was adapted accordingly (details are omitted from this thesis to protect the anonymity of participants and their organisations). Specifically, 19 out of the 34 initial interviews introduced common themes regarding organisational challenges and opportunities for engagement (see Chapter 6). Upon reflection of the literature and the researcher's own knowledge of engagement in policy and practice spheres (see section 3.5), this theme was identified as a key and under-explored issue which made an interesting and unique contribution to the research, exploring how many of the challenges experienced during engagement processes are rooted in organisational cultures and wider political and societal dynamics. In response to this, RQ2 was added to the research project: '*What are the challenges for institutionalising engagement and how can they be overcome?*'. The relevant 19 interviews were then reanalysed with this question in mind. The opportunity then came about to explore this theme in more detail through 5 additional interviews in UK-based environmental organisational settings. Therefore, the findings of a total of 24 interviews are presented in Chapter 6. These interviews were analysed in a way which considered and built upon themes which were already identified in the 19 interviews, while identifying unique themes (themes related to institutionalising engagement were included in the final coding framework used for analysing the interviews, see Appendix E). The opportunity to conduct additional interviews emerged as a result of dissemination, engagement, and impact-focused activities with non-academic stakeholders (see section 3.5; further details are withheld to protect the anonymity of the interview participants and their organisational affiliations). This was an important part of the agile, participatory, and impact-focused approach to the research as it enabled the research to adapt and respond to issues that the interviewees raised.

Interviews were conducted in a way that suited the participants (Adams and Cox, 2008), respecting their busy schedules and the unprecedented environment within which the interviews were being conducted (i.e., during the Covid-19 pandemic). The majority of the interviews were conducted online using videoconferencing platforms (Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or Google Meets) and 5 interviews were conducted via telephone at the request of participants. In all interview situations, both the researcher and interviewee were situated in their private homes (which highlighted a number of ethical considerations, see section 3.7.3). The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 120 minutes and yielded a total of 44 hours and 65 minutes of audio (the flexible design of the interviews and purposeful free-flowing nature of the conversations enabled some interviews to last longer than others).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the research switched to entirely online and remote methods (see section 3.6). There are debates around the effectiveness of online and remote qualitative methods compared to in-person situations (e.g., Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017; Archibald *et al.*, 2019; Hall *et al.*, 2021; Jowett, 2020; Lobe *et al.*, 2020), and Box 3 below outlines four key considerations for mitigating the risk of lost information and nuance during the interviews.

Interviews were recorded using automated transcription software Otter.ai (https://otter.ai). Interviewees were given the opportunity to 'opt-out' of the use of this software, in which case the interview would have been recorded using a digital voice recorder or manual notes (as opposed to third-party software), however no interviewees requested this. Automated transcription provided transcripts of sufficient quality, was considerably advantageous in terms of time and cost savings (Bokhove and Downey, 2018). It also provided a secure alternative to using an external transcription company (while transcripts stored in Otter.ai may be used to train the algorithm, they are not accessed by human beings[21]). Otter.ai was a useful tool for efficiency, accuracy, and productivity for the reasons outlined in Box 4 (more information can be found in the researcher's blog posts which shared key lessons learned[22]). Some ethical considerations around the use of automated transcription software for qualitative research are discussed in section 3.7.2.

[21] The Privacy Policy for Otter.ai can be viewed online here: https://otter.ai/privacy-policy. This information was also shared with the interviewees who participated in this research (see Appendix C).

[22] The researcher published blog posts which reflected on their experiences using automated transcription software for qualitative research. These can all be viewed on the researcher's blog/website (https://caitlinhafferty.blogspot.com/). References to individual posts – including a 3-part series on automated transcription (an introduction, a tutorial, and ethical considerations) – are included in Appendix A.

Box 3. Reflections on strategies to mitigate risk when conducting online qualitative interviews. *Source: based on the researcher's own experiences.*

i. To help capture body language and facial expression during the interviews (which can be beneficial for interpretation, as well as building trust and rapport), interviewees were encouraged to turn their webcams on during the interview. However, it was made clear that this was optional to respect participants' privacy, personal preferences, and ability to engage online.

ii. During the interview, participants were encouraged to share their screens and/or links to resources. With permission, the researcher could take screen shots and save links to materials for future reference (stored in accordance with the consent form and information sheets provided to participants). This was particularly useful to increase the researcher's understanding of how different digital tools and platforms were being used (and the contexts they were being used in).

iii. Informal notes were taken about the researcher's interpretation of key topics, tone of the interview, body language and facial expression, and so forth. These notes were used to inform the write-up of results, for example by refreshing the memory of the researcher about the interview situation and helping with the interpretation of particular quotes. These notes were then retained alongside the interview transcripts for use in future publications.

iv. In addition to the interviews, informal conversations (i.e., those which were not recorded and not included in the study) were also conducted with practitioners and practice-enablers throughout the data collection process. The purpose of this was to explore the wider context of the research and new/emerging themes to keep up to date with the research area and better understand (and engage with) practitioners' experiences.

Box 4. Reflections on the utility of automated transcription software for qualitative research. *Source: based on the researcher's own experiences.*

i. Inclusion of time stamps and the ability to take photos which are automatically embedded in the interview transcript. This inclusion of photos was useful when conducting online interviews as participants often shared their screens, or shared links to resources, to help illustrate a particular point that they were making. When this happened, with the interviewees' permission the researcher could take a photo of the screen to act as a reminder of the resource that was being shared.

ii. Ability to highlight key quotes and leave comments in the transcript in real time. During the interviews, key words were highlighted and comments added to emerging themes, which helped to inform the analysis stage.

iii. Automatic generation of key words and a word cloud (i.e., of most frequently cited words in the interview). While word clouds are by no means a sophisticated way to analyse text, they can provide a quick, easy, and engaging way to see which words are most prevalent in the transcript and to quicky compare between different interviews.

Verbatim transcriptions were then edited in the Otter.ai platform, for example to remove identifiable information, edit inaccuracies resulting from the automated transcription, to delete repetitions, and so forth (more information can be found on the researcher's blog[23]). Edited transcripts were then imported into qualitative analysis software (NVivo 12) where they were subject to a qualitative analysis. An initial (deductive) set of nodes and child nodes (i.e., themes and sub-themes) were created based on the overarching research questions, survey results, and literature review (see Appendix E).

Saliant passages of text were coded against the initial coding framework. During this process, additional nodes were developed through an inductive (bottom-up) approach to coding (Azungah, 2018; Thomas, 2003) – i.e., the process started with a set of nodes but then inductively added new nodes and iterated on them as the data was analysed (e.g., Saldana, 2009). Therefore, the framework evolved during the process of coding with new nodes added when considered necessary (i.e., where a new theme or idea emerged that was relevant to the research). This process of iterative coding was repeated until data saturation was reached

[23] A blog post detailing the approach of preparing automated interview transcripts for qualitative analysis was written by the researcher and published on their blog/website, see: https://caitlinhafferty.blogspot.com/2022/03/automated-transcription-qualitative-analysis.html.

(the point at which no new information or themes were observed in the data; see Guest *et al.*, 2006). In addition, a process of familiarisation was undertaken which involved reading and listening through the transcripts and adding comments to gain a feel for the research findings as a whole, before expanding on existing nodes or adding new ones (e.g., Ritchie and Spencer, 2002). Using automated transcription software was useful at this stage because comments added to the transcripts served as a prompt during the analysis phase (lessons learned were shared by the researcher in a blog post[19]). The initial and subsequent rounds of coding were completed by the researcher (Hafferty), with members of the research supervisory team (Brockett, Berry, Short, and Orford) providing feedback during both rounds to (i) verify the existing coding choices, and (ii) ensure that all relevant passages and excerpts had been coded (i.e., helping to ensure that content had not been missed). Although this multi-stage approach to coding acted as a system of verification and is partly systematic (offering a reproducible structure and process), it is important to be clear that the coding remains subject to the interpretation of the researcher, and therefore is ultimately subjective. To add clarity and weight to points (and for transparency and contextualisation), where possible, statements in the results (e.g., 'the majority of participants' or 'several participants') are supported with the number of participants who cited/referenced/articulated a particular point (using their participant ID). Although this approach was used to strengthen the points made, it is recommended that the figures are approached with caution owing to the subjective nature of the coding process. A final version of the coding framework can be found in Appendix E.

3.3.3 A note on presentation of the data

As a mixed-methods piece of research with emphasis on the qualitative stages, and the aim to explore participants' perceptions and experiences, this thesis draws heavily on participant voice, i.e., direct (anonymised) quotes from the interviews. The results from the quantitative stage are presented in Chapter 4 to provide a background and introduction to the subsequent qualitative chapters (Chapters 5 and 6). Survey data is presented using both of the raw number of participants (represented using *N* and *n*) and the percentage of the total of respondents.

With regards to the qualitative data, it is important to note that all utterances ('ums' and 'ahs'), false starts, repetition, information which could identify participants, and words considered to be irrelevant to the point/narrative have been removed to make the quotes more readable. Removed words are indicated by […] and additional information (e.g., to provide context) is presented in {}. Some specific information has been removed or reduced from the interviews transcripts to protect participants' anonymity. All names of people and organisations have been removed and replaced by a generic identifier (e.g., 'staff member', 'manager', 'public body', or 'software company'). Locations (e.g., place names) and other identifiable information were also removed. Wherever appropriate, the names of software tools and platforms have been removed from direct quotes so that they cannot be attributed to individual participants. Alongside each quote, the participant ID is provided (e.g., PR01, PR15, PR22[24]) as well as the type of organisation that the participant worked in (e.g., 'UK government department', 'local authority', and so forth). The organisational information is provided for purely descriptive and contextualisation purposes only. Interview participants are referred to collectively as 'engagers' or 'interviewees' in this the empirical chapters to avoid confusion between the interview sample and references to engagement participants.

The presentation of the results in the subsequent chapters is organised according to the themes generated by the qualitative analysis (see the final NVivo coding framework in Appendix E). Although these themes emerged around the original research questions, additional sections are included, due to the fact that themes emerged from the literature review, participant interviews, and engagement with non-academic stakeholders. The themes are brought together in Chapter 7 to answer the research questions.

3.4 Introduction to the sample

In order to provide context to the subsequent chapters, this section reports on the practitioners and practice-enablers who took part in the survey questionnaire (N=58) and semi-structured interviews (N=39) for the research. All information about the survey and interview samples is included in this section and in the Appendices.

3.4.1 Survey questionnaire

Some basic demographic information was collected from survey participants, including gender, age, highest qualification, and location (the region of the UK that they lived/worked). This is summarised below. The purpose of this was to provide a brief description of respondents, rather than to make any reflections about the representativeness of the sample (e.g., how the sample compares to practitioners in the environment and planning sector as a whole). Due to the small sample size and for transparency, the number of participants is reported alongside percentages.

Gender: Out of the 58 survey respondents, 45% were male (n = 26), 53% were female (n = 31), and the remainder (n = 1) did not give a response. Age (Figure 9): most respondents were aged between 25 and 54: 29% aged 25-34 (n = 17), 28% between 45-54 (n = 16), and 24%

[24] The 'PR' stands for 'practitioner' or 'practice-enabler'.

between 35-44 (n = 14). Highest qualification (Figure 10): Respondents were highly qualified with the vast majority holding either a bachelor's degree (35%, n = 20), a master's degree (33%, n = 19), or a doctorate (28%, n = 16). 8 participants (14%) were aged 55-64, and there was 1 participant from each of the remaining age categories.

Figure 10. Age of survey participants (N = 58).

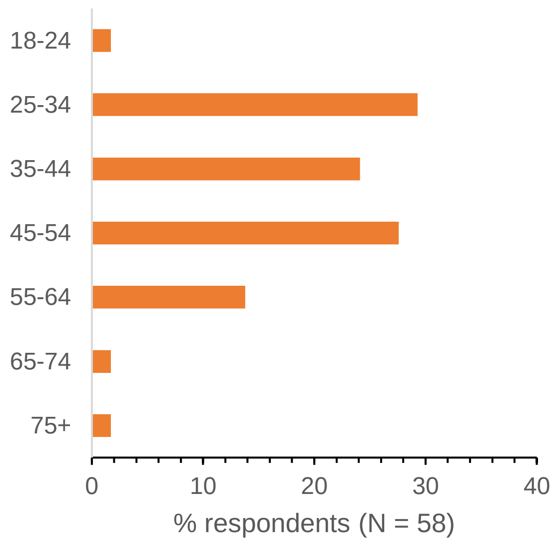
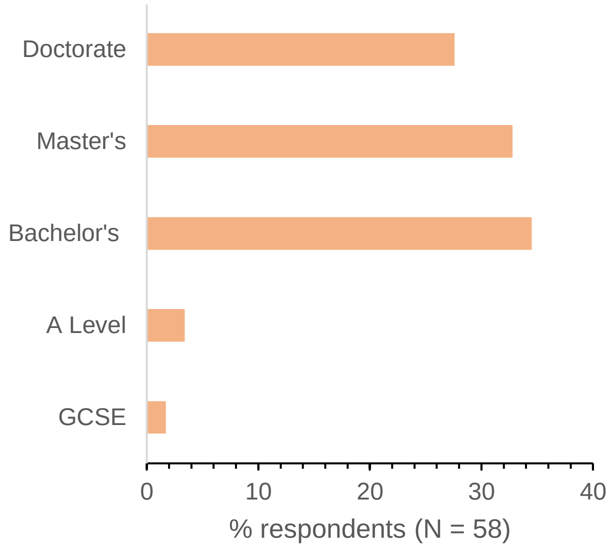


Figure 9. Highest qualification of survey participants (N = 58)

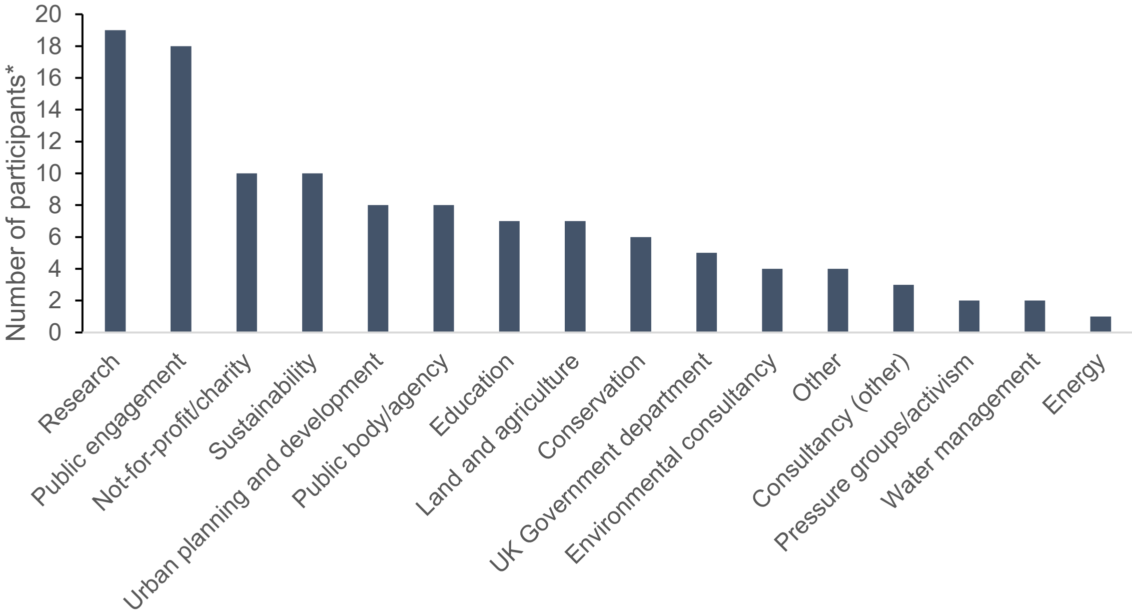


Location: As shown in Table 2, the majority of survey respondents (n = 29) lived in the South or South East of England (others were from the Midlands, Northern regions of England, and outside of England in Scotland and Wales). 10 participants usually worked in a different area to where they lived.

Table 2. The UK region where survey respondents lived and worked (N = 57).

UK region	**Lived**	**Worked**
North East	2	3
North West	1	1
Yorkshire	4	4
West Midlands	1	2
East Midlands	0	0
South West	15	14
South East	5	8
East of England	4	4
London	9	8
Scotland	5	4
Northern Ireland	1	1
Wales	7	6
Other (outside UK)	3	2

Figure 11. Area of work of survey participants (N=58).



***Multi answer: participants could select up to 3 options; the chart shows the number of participants who selected each answer option.**

Figure 11 shows the areas within which survey participants worked. The majority of participants' work involved research (*n* = 19) and public engagement (*n* = 18), with other areas including not-for-profit work (*n* = 10), sustainability (*n* = 10), urban planning and development (*n* = 8), non-departmental public sector (n = 8), education (*n* = 7), land and agriculture (*n* = 7), conservation (*n* = 6), departmental public sector (*n* = 5), environmental consultancy (*n* = 4), other consultancies (*n* = 4), pressure groups and activism (*n* = 2), water management (*n* = 2) and 'other' areas (*n* = 4) including software, social media, and food/retail.

Out of the participants who reported details about their organisation type (this question was optional in the survey), the majority worked in universities and other educational organisations (*n* = 12), consultancies (*n* = 10), and charities/not-for-profits (*n* = 6). Others worked for UK Government departments (*n* = 5), local authorities (*n* = 5), non-departmental public body (*n* = 2), water companies (*n* = 2), energy companies (*n* = 1), museums (*n* = 1), journalism/media (*n* = 1), food/retailers (*n* = 1), and others (*n* = 2) including people who were retired.

Out of the participants who reported their job type in the survey (this question was also optional), most worked in management roles (e.g., as managers, directors, and CEOs) (*n* = 19), academic positions (e.g., lecturers, professors, and researchers) (*n* = 11), and as researchers and scientists in non-academic organisations (e.g., public bodies) (n = 9). Other roles included project management and coordination (n = 5), councillors (n = 2).

3.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

A total of 39 interviews were conducted with engagement practitioners and practice-enablers from different UK-based organisations in the public, private, and third sectors. Table 4 provides a full list of participants. Practitioners and practice-enablers included those who were actively involved in engagement as part of their professional role (including researchers). Demographic information was collected from 27 of the interview participants through the survey questionnaire. For the 12 participants who were not able to complete the survey, some background information was collected at the start of the interview (Appendix D). To be clear, the background information about participants is intended to provide context only, rather than to make claims about the representativeness of the sample.

In summary, the majority of interviewees were aged between 30 and 50 years old, were highly qualified, and lived/worked in the South of England. To provide more detail, there was a relatively even gender split (15 male, 12 female) and over half were aged between 35 and 54, with 7 participants under the age of 25, and the 4 participants aged 55 and over (the age distribution could be due to the way that participants were recruited: online and within professional networks). The majority of interviewees (10) held a bachelor's degree as their highest qualification, with similar numbers holding a master's degree (9) or a doctorate (8). This is likely another consequence of recruiting participants through the researcher's professional networks, which tended be within academic spheres. The majority (18) interviewees lived and worked in the South of England: London, the South West, and the South East. Four participants worked in the East of England, two in Yorkshire and the Humber, and one in the North East. Three participants worked in Wales and one in Scotland. The concentration of participants from the South of England was likely due to the fact that the researcher lived and studied in this area, which created a bias towards recruiting participants from these areas through social media and a 'snowballing' technique. For future research, different sampling methods could be used to capture more of a geographic spread (e.g., systematic sampling of planning and environment practitioners in the UK).

Each participant was currently (at the time of interviewing) or recently (prior to the first UK COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020) involved in engaging public or other stakeholder groups in planning and/or environmental decision-making processes. This included a range of different engagement work in government departments and agencies, non-departmental public bodies, councils, consultancies, charities, and software companies. Participants' roles within their organisations predominantly included executive and managerial positions (e.g. CEOs, directors, managers), consultants, scientists/analysts (outside of higher education, e.g. in the public and private sectors), advisors (e.g., on conservation and environmental management), town planners and councillors. Some participants held more than one role and/or were undertaking different roles and responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (compared to their usual pre-pandemic role).

The interview participants were conducting engagement for a variety of different purposes and reasons. Each interview started with a brief discussion of the context and purpose of the engagement activities that the interviewee was involved in (see Appendix D). This information is not included in depth in this thesis due to the risk of identifying the interviewees but is summarised in Table 3 as supplementary background information. The majority of interviewees were conducting different types of engagement, for different reasons, with different groups and individuals, at different stages in the project and/or decision-making process. As Tables 3 and 4 below indicate, this thesis focuses on challenges and opportunities for engagement which span multiple different contexts, purposes, goals, aims, objectives, and types of engagement.

Table 3. Background information about the interview participants (practitioners and practice-enablers involved with carrying out engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes). *Source: the research interviews.*

Type of engagement:	The type of engagement that was being conducted by interviewees ranged considerably from information provision and awareness raising, consultations (statutory and non-statutory), to collaborative and or co-produced approaches.
Extent of involvement with engagement:	Interviewees ranged from being very actively involved in carrying out engagement processes (i.e., that their job involved engaging frequently) to those who were less active and engaged less frequently.
Engagement participants:	Engagement participants ranged from the general public to local community groups, farmers and land managers, local authorities, not-for-profit organisations, industry, science professionals, and a variety of other groups and individuals.
Aims/objectives:	Interviewees were conducting engagement for a variety of different reasons including: • Communicating information/advice, • Producing better information to support decision-making outcomes, • Involving local people and capture local knowledges, • To develop and/or improve relationships, • To improve trust and credibility, • To involve the public and/or stakeholders in developing organisational strategies, • Promoting pro-environmental behaviour/raising awareness of an environmental issue, • Encouraging two-way knowledge exchange, • Initiating co-production/co-design, • To fulfil a statutory requirement, • Responding to a client/customer request, among other reasons and aims.
Definition/understanding of engagement:	Different participants had different understandings of what engagement involves, the role of public and stakeholder actors, and the goals and outcomes/outputs of the process. The majority of interviewees were conducting different types of engagement, for different reasons, with different groups and individuals, at different stages in the project and/or decision-making process.

Table 4 provides a broad anonymised summary of the 39 interviewees whose contributions were included in this thesis. Interviewees are identified by a participant ID ('PR' refers to 'practitioner' or 'practice-enabler' and the number refers to the participant number). Interview PR35 included two participants who were interviewed together from the same organisation, so to identify both participants' contributions they are labelled as PR35a and PR35b.

Interviewees worked in a range of organisations, with most working in universities and other educational roles (*n* = 8), non-departmental public bodies (*n* = 7), and consultancies (*n* = 7). Other participants worked in charities/not-for-profits (*n* = 5), software companies (*n* = 4), UK government departments (*n* = 3), local authorities (including parish, county, and borough councils) (*n* = 3), museums (*n* = 1), and journalism/media (*n* = 1). Of the interview participants who provided this information (this was optional to respect participants' anonymity), interviewees mostly worked in management roles (e.g., as managers, directors, and CEOs) (*n* = 9), academic positions (e.g., lecturers, professors, and researchers) (*n* = 6), and as researchers and scientists in non-academic organisations (e.g., public bodies) (*n* = 4). Other roles (*n* = 8) included project management and coordination, councillors, educators, and an adviser. Some interviewees also had more than one role within their organisation, or more than one role across different organisations. Interviewees worked in different, and usually several, specialist professional areas spanning public engagement (*n* = 14), research (*n* = 12), conservation (*n* = 10), sustainability and climate change (*n* = 7), urban planning and development (*n* = 7), land and agriculture (*n* = 6), not-for-profit work (*n* = 5), and education (*n* = 4). It is important to note that the numbers (*n*) provided here are for descriptive and contextual purposes only.

Table 4. Interview participant sample and identification (ID) alongside organisation type and area of work.

Participant ID	**Organisation type**	**Area of work**
PR01	Consultancy	• Public engagement
PR02	Education	• Education • Public engagement • Sustainability
PR03	Local authority	• Public body/agency
PR04	Charity/not-for-profit	• Pressure group/activism • Not-for-profit/charity • Food poverty
PR05	Charity/not-for-profit	• Sustainability • Land and agriculture • Not-for-profit/charity
PR06	Charity/not-for-profit	• Conservation • Environmental consultancy • Land and agriculture
PR07	University	• Conservation • Sustainability • Research
PR08	Journalism and media	• Conservation • Public engagement • Land and agriculture
PR09	Non-departmental public body	• Research
PR10	University	• Education • Research
PR11	University	• Research
PR12	Software company	• Public engagement • Software
PR13	Local authority	• Urban planning/development • Public body/agency • Public engagement
PR14	Museum	• Research
PR15	Software company	• Land and agriculture • Sustainability

PR16	Government department	• UK Government department • Public body/agency • Research
PR17	University	• Education • Research • Climate change
PR18	Government department	• Land and agriculture, • UK Government department • Research
PR19	Charity/not-for-profit	• Not-for-profit/charity
PR20	Consultancy	• Sustainability • Urban planning/development • Not-for-profit/charity
PR21	Government department	• UK Government department
PR22	Consultancy	• Public engagement
PR23	Consultancy	• Urban planning/development • Public engagement
PR24	University	• Public engagement • Sustainability • Research
PR25	Local authority	• Urban planning/development
PR26	Software company	• Education • Public engagement
PR27	Consultancy	• Urban planning/development • Politics
PR28	Non-departmental public body	• Conservation • Public body/agency • Research
PR29	University	• Research • Land and agriculture
PR30	Charity/not-for-profit	• Not-for-profit/charity • Public engagement
PR31	University	• Conservation • Public engagement • Research
PR32	Consultancy	• Public engagement

		• Urban planning/development
PR33	Software company	• Public engagement
PR34	Consultancy	• Public engagement • Urban planning/development
PR35a **PR35b**	Non-departmental public body	• Conservation • Public body/agency
PR36	Non-departmental public body	• Conservation • Public body/agency
PR37	Non-departmental public body	• Conservation • Public body/agency
PR38	Non-departmental public body	• Conservation • Public body/agency
PR39	Non-departmental public body	• Conservation • Public body/agency

3.5 Engagement with non-academic stakeholders

This research is grounded in an interdisciplinary and participatory approach (section 3.2.1). This section describes how engagement with non-academic stakeholders, and indicators of progress towards impact, helped to continuously shape the research process including framing the research questions, aims, and objectives. This includes reflections on the benefits of this approach and how it can be practically achieved within a doctoral study in an agile manner which helps to drive, adapt, and re-orient the research through experienced risks and challenges. Ultimately, this approach helped to (re)frame the way that the researcher viewed and appreciated conducting academic research; providing a sense of purpose and motivation, enabling a sense of achievement when benefits were achieved (e.g., through indicators of successful engagement), and creating space to learn from challenges encountered and sharing the lessons learned (see section 3.7). The following sections explain how the approach influenced the research process, while also providing practical information and potential inspiration for others seeking to apply a similar approach in their own research (section 3.5.1 introduces impact-focused and engaged research, 3.5.1 summarises the impact goals and motives, 3.5.3 the extent and significance of engagement with non-academic stakeholders and the specific actions taken to enable this to happen). A full list of the different engagement and dissemination activities used in this thesis can be viewed in Appendix A.

3.5.1 Impact-focused research in the social sciences

There is an increasing awareness and rationale to conduct interdisciplinary, participatory, impactful, and industry-linked research (Boucher *et al.,* 2004; Chammas *et al.*, 2020; ESRC, 2022c; Fazey *et al.*, 2018; Jensen *et al.,* 2016; Reed, 2018; Reed and Fazey, 2021). For example, UKRI's doctoral training portfolio includes the opportunity to conduct internships with non-academic organisations in the UK[25], and the ESRC is committed to promoting impact-focused research[26]. It is widely recognised that participatory and impactful research projects are more likely to produce outcomes that are of tangible and immediate use to practitioners, policymakers, and other key stakeholders[27] (see Boucher *et al*., 2004; Biegal et al., 2001).

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[25] UKRI Policy Internships scheme: https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/developing-people-and-skills/find-studentships-and-doctoral-training/get-training-and-development-to-support-your-doctorate/ukri-policy-internships/. Accessed September 2022.

[26] UKRI Impact toolkit for economic and social sciences: https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/impact-toolkit-for-economic-and-social-sciences/. Accessed September 2022.

[27] However, there are varying perspectives of research impact in academia and its implications for research funding, motivation, and quality (e.g., see Chubb and Reed, 2018).

Generating societal, cultural, and economic impact was central to the research approach and was designed into the research from the outset. This included setting goals for impact and planning for how to achieve these goals, which involved (re)framing the aims, objectives, design choices and methods. The impact strategy is ongoing (as of 2022) and will continue after the thesis is completed, in order to ensure that the findings are shared with potential users and beneficiaries of the research in an effective, relevant, and meaningful way (see Chapter 8 for more details of the plan for research dissemination).

Although this thesis was inspired by guidelines on impact-focused research - including the ESRC's definition and toolkit for impact (ESRC, 2022a, 2022b), The Research Impact Handbook (Reed, 2018), and the literature on participatory, problem-focused, and action-oriented research (e.g., Chammas *et al.*, 2020; Fazey *et al.*, 2018) – these were approached as flexible suggestions rather than prescriptive guidelines to create space to explore what worked, while being mindful of project constraints and managing stakeholders' expectations.

3.5.2 Impact goals, motives, and their influence on the research process

According to Reed (2018), it is important to understand the types of impact that the research might be able to generate which involves developing a core goal and understanding the motives behind why impact is desired. The impact goal should set clear objectives for impact and creating a plan for how to achieve them, considering which pathway is most appropriate in a given situation (i.e., accounting for contextual factors and socio-economic constraints which could affect the research and ability to achieve impact, including capacity and resource limitations). For this thesis, it was also important to be mindful and purposeful about creating space for stakeholder engagement and impact-generating activities. This involved prioritising identifying and developing trusting relationships with potential users and beneficiaries of the research, as well as cutting back other non-essential activities (e.g., answering emails and attending academic committee meetings). This also meant that the research was more focused on producing outputs which were easily accessible to non-academic audiences – such as reports, blog posts, and infographics – as opposed to academic journal papers.

Goals for achieving impact were identified at the start of the research and were adapted in response to stakeholder need. To help achieve these goals, the first steps towards an impact plan were developed through engaging with stakeholders. Within the available time and resources, the research made positive and meaningful steps on the journey towards fulfilling the impact goal (Chapter 8 provides a discussion of how the pathway to impact will continue beyond this research project). The impact goal of the research is included in Chapter 1 (section 1.1) and summarised below.

Impact goal: To enhance existing practices for effective public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes in the UK, by producing evidence from the research that meets gaps in current understanding and can contribute to existing models (and guidance, toolkits, frameworks, etc.) for explaining what works. Specifically, the research will contribute knowledge about the challenges and opportunities for digital engagement and institutionalising effective engagement strategies.

The motive behind these impact goals was to produce evidence for stakeholders in a relevant, useful, and (where possible within the available resources) timely manner to help achieve tangible impacts in real world situations. This was underpinned by the researcher's own personal values and identity as a researcher that research should remain useful beyond academia in order to make a meaningful and positive change in the world, which was strengthened throughout the PhD journey.

3.5.3 The extent and significance of engagement with non-academic stakeholders

To help represent the needs and priorities of those who might be interested in, or benefit from, the research, target public and stakeholder groups were identified including non-departmental public bodies, government departments, local authorities, not-for-profits, and private industry (specific details are withheld to protect the anonymity of specific organisations). This section includes information about the nature and importance of engagement activities with target groups, including how this helped to shape the research process, and the specific actions taken to enabled engagement to happen. It is also important to think about indicators of successful engagement and progress towards impact (e.g., feedback, invitations to talks, and identifiable changes in practice; see Appendix A), as well as any potential risks to engagement activities and achieving impact (e.g., lack of interest from key stakeholders).

Practitioners and practice-enablers: The research aimed to make a change in how environmental organisations understand and carry out stakeholder engagement. To help achieve this, part of the literature review was published as an evidence report for Natural England (Hafferty, 2022), a non-departmental public body and the government's advisor for the natural environment in England. This evidence report was then summarised in an infographic resource pack aimed at non-academic stakeholders, which was made available to download for free and shared widely on social media (see Appendix A). Part of this work involved starting to develop evidence-led recommendations for stakeholder engagement for

NE (an unpublished draft was used internally)[28]. The researcher took time to understand the organisational context within which these outputs would be used, listening to the needs of staff to ensure that outputs were relevant and accessible.

Feedback was received that this work continues to be used, tested, and developed within the organisation. Specifically, feedback was received that the evidence report formed the foundation upon which the organisation will continue their aspirations for embedding a best practice culture of engagement. The report was also used to influence the evidence base for the organisation's core programmes (i.e., to identify current evidence and gaps in knowledge). In addition, the evidence-led guidance continued to be used, tested, and developed within the organisation. At a later stage in the research, a research tender was developed that was based on knowledge gaps identified by the evidence report (this resulted in the internal publication of research into embedding a best practice culture of engagement; see Chiswell et al., 2022). The research aims to continue to shape organisation's ambitions to embed an evidence-led, best practice culture of engagement (see Chapter 8).

Government and policy makers: The research aimed to generate instrumental impact by influencing the development of policy and practice, shaping legislation, and changing behaviour. Throughout the research, potential interest groups were identified, engaged with, and indicators of successful engagement were reflected upon.

In February 2021, the researcher was invited to contribute to an expert review being conducted by the Defra's Social Science Expert Group (SSEG), a subgroup of the Science Advisory Council (SAC). Findings from the research contributed to Defra's review (Defra, 2022) which was concerned with the contribution of public engagement to effective analysis and policy-making, aiming to inform Defra's approach to, and use of, public engagement in the context of policy development. In addition, research findings were shared with the Digital Planning Team and (former) Chief Planner of DLUHC, which included discussing the relevance of the research for the UK Planning White Paper (DLUHC, 2021) and how it could help meet the organisation's priorities. Social media and blogging were particularly useful strategies for initiating engagement here, as the researcher was contacted via Twitter by interested parties, which instigated further engagement. Findings were also shared with Policy Lab and the

[28] This work was conducted as part of a contracted research placement to develop evidence-led, best practice outputs for stakeholder engagement in Natural England. As such, this chapter only includes a description of work which was directly linked to the PhD research (i.e., dissemination of the literature review and early findings of the research, as well as engaging – and maintaining a relationship with - with a key interest group and potential user of the research outputs). More details about the outputs of this placement can be found in this blog post: https://www.ccri.ac.uk/news/08/2022/key-considerations-for-best-practice-stakeholder-engagement-in-environmental-decision-making/.

researcher was invited to review BEIS guidance on engagement and innovation. Finally, informed by the early findings of the research, the researcher contributed to a UK Parliament POST (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology) horizon scan, 'Life beyond Covid: What are experts concerned about?'[29] as one of 366 responses (the response focused on the impacts of the pandemic for the development of future technologies and implications for society and communities).

However, there were limitations and risk factors which affected the ability of the research to conduct further engagement and achieve impact, mainly due to lack of resources (including time and funding), availability of training (and time available to attend it), as well as the capacity and capability of the researcher. While it is important for impact goals to be ambitious, it is also important for them to be realistic, taking into account project constraints (O'Donovan, Michalec and Moon, 2022; Reed, 2018). The dissemination, engagement, and impact plan for this thesis is outlined in Chapter 8.

Private industry: The research aimed to share knowledge with industry bodies to help understand how the research could be useful and relevant, as well as helping to promote understandings of hybrid, flexible, and adaptable engagement.

This involved identifying and engaging with variety of consultancies and public engagement software companies. This was achieved by a variety of online dissemination and outreach activities including publishing blog posts (both on the researcher's personal blog/website, and in collaboration with professional organisations)[30,31], a podcast on stakeholder engagement[32], as and contributing to 'Lunch and Learn' sessions in two non-academic organisations (see Appendix A). Following this engagement, positive feedback was received by one of the organisations regarding the relevance, usefulness, and potential impact of the research (stating that the organisation will be considering key lessons from the research regarding blending in-person and digital engagement, and that they will try and incorporate them into future communications and product development). It is important to highlight here how one type of research dissemination can lead to other opportunities; for example, after publishing

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[29] Horizon scanning report on 'Life beyond COVID-19: What are experts concerned about?'. Online at: https://post.parliament.uk/life-beyond-covid-19-what-are-experts-concerned-about/. Accessed September 2022. Also see Appendix A.

[30] Hafferty, C. (2020) 'Public and stakeholder engagement, Covid-19, and the 'digital explosion': are we heading towards a more 'blended' approach?' [Guest blog] Grasshopper Communications UK. 27th July.

[31] Hafferty, C. (2020) 'Blending online and offline community engagement' [Guest blog] Commonplace. 6th October.

[32] Engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic (The UK Consult Podcast). Online at: https://open.spotify.com/episode/5bhsDwf8N3Xei715hTtlnT.

blog posts and infographics in collaboration with two non-academic organisations (and sharing on social media), these were picked up by other organisations who contacted the researcher to invite them to engage in other ways (including a podcast and the inclusion of the researcher's blog posts on online communities of practice).

Specifically, two blog posts were published as guest posts for professional organisations, including one which was written under contract (see section 3.7.1). The researcher also published a series of infographics to disseminate early findings and reflections to potential users and beneficiaries of the research (see Appendix A). These were shared via social media and later shared on the 'RRI Tools' (Responsible Research and Innovation) website[33].

Following this engagement/dissemination and as a direct result of the connections made, the researcher was invited to be a guest speaker to the Consultation Institute's annual conference, Connect 2022 (for more information, see: https://www.consultationinstitute.org/connect2022/). This provided an important opportunity to present key findings of the research to a non-academic audience and establish new connections with interest groups and potential beneficiaries from across the UK.

Members of the public: The research increased awareness of opportunities for communities to influence decision-making. Responding to needs identified during the pandemic, a website and blog were set up to share key learnings from the research project in a timely and accessible manner. As a result of sharing this information, the researcher was invited to write further blog posts for public-facing non-academic organisations, deliver webinars as a guest speaker, and participate in a podcast (which in turn helped to generate more engagement activity; see Appendix A). These activities were further promoted by the researcher's involvement in co-organising a conference (with Bruna Montuori) on participatory methods which was free to attend and aimed at both academic and non-academic audiences[34].

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[33] Blending online and offline community engagement (Hafferty, 2020) online on RRI Tools at: https://rri-tools.eu/en/-/blending-online-and-offline-community-engagement. Accessed September 2022.

[34] Details regarding the 2021 event 'Contemporary Issues in Participatory Geography' (co-organised by the researcher through the RGS-IBG Participatory Geographies Research Group - PYGYRG) can be found on the PYGYRG website: https://pygyrg.org/contemporary-issues-in-participatory-geography-event-recordings and https://pygyrg.org/contemporary-issues-in-participatory-geography-event-programme. Also see Appendix A.

3.6 Challenges encountered and sharing the lessons learned

The previous section discussed the goals and specific actions taken to help generate real world impact, which involved being agile in adapting to the needs of potential users and beneficiaries of the research. This section reflects on challenges encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, discusses how issues and risks were navigated, identifies mistakes made and how the researcher shared the lessons learned.

COVID-19 has had a traumatic effect on the way that people live and work in their day-to-day lives[35], with lasting shocks across the world. The PhD research was conducted almost entirely during the COVID-19 pandemic and encountered numerous challenges, which meant that the research was adapted and reframed throughout the process. During the first UK lockdown, planned in-person fieldwork (which consisted of 'walking and talking' interviews and participatory mapping techniques) was cancelled. In addition, the original non-academic partner of the PhD research (a community council) - with which the researcher was collaborating to design the research, collect data, and recruit participants – was no longer able to support the research as they focused on emergency COVID-19 relief. A fundamental challenge was adapting the research based on stakeholder needs and maintaining the planned participatory (and transdisciplinary) elements of the project (see section 3.2.1). By demonstrating how these challenges can be overcome by successfully navigating the pandemic and re-orienting the research throughout the process, this thesis offers an example of how research can be agile in responding to current and unexpected issues. This is particularly important academia and academic funding has been criticised for its inadequacy to respond to current and unexpected issues; an issue which is currently being explored by research projects at the University of Exeter (Advancing Capacity for Climate and Environmental Social Science (ACCESS) project - https://greenfutures.exeter.ac.uk/access/) and University of Oxford (The Agile Initiative - https://www.agile-initiative.ox.ac.uk/).

In response to these challenges, the researcher actively reached out to potential beneficiaries and users of the research to understand the challenges and adaptations that they were experiencing. This involved highlighting needs and priorities, identifying opportunities where the research could be useful, and adapting the research accordingly. The decision was made to move all research methods online which involved launching an online survey to capture the experiences of potential users of the research and other stakeholders (this included asking participants what they felt were the most important issues facing them at the time which could

[35] In the UK, the (then) Prime Minister announced on the first lockdowns in March 2020. This started a timeline of restrictions including orders to 'Stay at home' (and later to 'Stay local'), limits to indoor and outdoor gatherings (e.g., 'Rule of six'), and compulsory mask wearing in most public and indoor venues.

be investigated by the research). The findings from the survey were then used to inform the subsequent stages of the research. In addition, the researcher actively reached out to potential interest groups/beneficiaries via social media, academic and non-academic webinars, and other professional networks (e.g., LinkedIn). To help facilitate this, the researcher started a blog and website to collate and promote relevant materials[36] and share on social media[37] to expand reach.

This period of rapid change involved re-orienting the central aims, objectives, research questions, methods, and participants of the PhD research. This was challenging for the researcher as it sometimes involved the difficult decision to 'let go' of established directions of the research. For example, the research changed to the extent that both project and ethical approval needed to be re-applied for through the University. This also involved scrapping work which had already been conducted for the research to meet the original aims and objectives. In response, the researcher reminded themselves why they wanted to do research in the first place: motivated by their personal values, it was important that research was conducted which was useful for potential beneficiaries and the researcher was curious about how stakeholders could be engaged with to ask new questions, co-produce knowledge, and achieve impact. This inspired the researcher to incorporate key learnings in this thesis, while taking every opportunity to share experiences and lessons learned with those who were encountering similar challenges.

While challenges were encountered and overcome during the pandemic, these experiences were also shared with others who were encountering similar issues and adaptations. This involved sharing knowledge with both academic and non-academic audiences. For example, the researcher's personal blog and social media platforms were used to share advice on adapting research according to stakeholder need, using online methods, and navigating ethical considerations. This included a variety of approaches to share knowledge with PhD students and early career researchers: a blog post on adapting PhD research during a pandemic[38], a webinar on 'Navigating online fieldwork during COVID-19' (Liquid Lab, Loughborough University, November 2020), and contributing to a panel discussion on science

[36] A blog and website were set up to support the PhD in 2020. The blog evolved over time as the project developed, including the addition of pages to share engagement and outreach materials such as infographics, webinar recordings, and podcasts: https://caitlinhafferty.blogspot.com/.

[37] The researcher's personal Twitter account was used to disseminate findings, engage with stakeholders, and expand reach to a variety of groups and individuals: https://twitter.com/CaitlinHafferty.

[38] Blog post on adapting research during the COVID-19 pandemic published in 2020: https://caitlinhafferty.blogspot.com/2020/11/how-i-adapted-my-phd-research.html.

communication in geography research (Royal Geographical Society with IBG Postgraduate Midterm Conference, April 2021). See Appendix A for more details.

Lessons learnt from the process of using automated transcription for qualitative research were also shared. In recent years, improvements in automated speech-to-text transcription software have made it possible for this technology to transform elements of work (Markoff, 2020), for example, Otter.ai was promoted during the pandemic for transcribing online meetings (Perez, 2021). The researcher identified an opportunity to use automated transcription software to increase the efficiency of the research process, particularly as qualitative interviews were being increasingly conducted online. A knowledge gap was also identified regarding the practical and ethical issues arising from automated transcription (Bokhove and Downey, 2018; Da Silva, 2021), particularly in research contexts (Louw, 2021; Palys and Atchison, 2012). The use of automated transcription software is an interesting ethical development: although it is common practice for universities to use external transcription companies (often without knowing much about the company except that it is on a list provided by the institution), this research has found that the use of automated transcription apps can be more efficient, more accurate, and also potentially more secure, and is therefore deserving of further investigation. Key learnings were shared in the form of a 3-part blog post series (see Appendix A) including an introduction to automated transcription, a tutorial, and reflections on the practical and ethical debates around its use. The posts have since been viewed thousands of times and were shared widely on social media, including being promoted by Otter.ai's Twitter page and featured/tagged on their profile[39]. Positive feedback was also received from PhD students and other researchers who were starting to think about the possibility of using automated transcription in their own work. As a result of this dissemination, the researcher was invited to conduct a public webinar which was attended by over 40 people and was shared via YouTube[40] and SlideShare[41] (see Appendix A).

Finally, during the thesis write-up stage, the researcher identified the opportunity to share lists of resources on topics relevant to the research on social media. This included a thread shared on Twitter which contained publications relevant to conducting qualitative research online

[39]See Otter.ai's Tweets about the researcher's blog posts here: https://twitter.com/otter_ai/status/1269023772234973184 and https://twitter.com/_SimonLau/status/1268897253692854272.

[40] CCRI Seminar 24 June 2021 – Automated transcription for qualitative research by Caitlin Hafferty: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRsH61aCG_U. Also see Appendix A.

[41]Caitlin Hafferty's presentation regarding the use of automated transcription software for qualitative research. Presented as part of CCRI's online seminar series: https://www.slideshare.net/CCRI/automated-transcription-for-qualitative-research. See Appendix A.

which reached a large audience of people[42]. Sharing resources on social media was useful for creating a succinct list which could be saved and referred to for future use and connecting the researcher with likeminded individuals. Perhaps most importantly for the PhD research, people posted their own resources in the Twitter thread which could then be read and included in the literature review, which helped the researcher to keep up to date with progress in relevant fields.

Ultimately, sharing lessons learned during the PhD research helped the researcher to discover new ways to conduct research online, share knowledge and good practices, and feel solidarity as part of a wider community who were collectively experiencing change during an otherwise socially and professionally isolating period of time.

3.7 Ethical considerations

It is essential that research is undertaken in accordance with ethical guidelines for ensuring the reliability of data, mutual trust and respect between the researcher, participants, and other stakeholders and for promoting social and moral values throughout the research process (e.g., Resnik, 2011). Ethical approval for this project was obtained from the University of Gloucestershire and was carried out in accordance with their ethics guidelines[43] (https://www.glos.ac.uk/information/knowledge-base/research-ethics-a-handbook-of-principles-and-procedures/). The research also followed the UK Government's COVID-19 regulations and guidance on conducting research (see UKRI's continuously evolving ethical guidance for researchers during the pandemic: https://www.ukri.org/about-us/policies-standards-and-data/good-research-resource-hub/covid-19-ethics-guidance/). In addition, the research adhered to the guidance provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Research Ethics Framework (https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/). This involved considering ethics issues throughout the lifecycle of the research project (including the planning and research design stage, the funded period, as well as any other activities that relate to the project), promoting a culture of ethical reflection, debate, and mutual learning (including knowledge exchange and impact activities, the dissemination process, and the achieving and future use of data).

[42] Twitter thread on online methods for qualitative research (650,000 views, 1000+ retweets, 5000+ likes): https://twitter.com/CaitlinHafferty/status/1556620822403481604.

[43] The University of Gloucestershire's ethics guidelines include ensuring that any foreseeable harm to participants, the researcher, and other stakeholders was minimised and that the rights of participants, researchers, and other stakeholders were upheld (including participants' rights to informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity).

The research participant consent forms contained links to information about the research (see Appendices B and C). This included relevant contact details for the project, clarification that data will be anonymised and stored safely, and that participants could withdraw from the interview at any time, without giving a reason. This was particularly important for building and maintaining trust with participants. Consent forms were completed prior to the interviews. In some situations where it was not possible for participants to provide written consent (e.g., due to time constraints) verbal consent was attained at the start of each interview however, when in some instances prior to the interview (Miller and Boulton, 2007).

3.7.1 Reflexivity and researcher positionality

Reflexivity and reflections on researcher positionality were ongoing throughout the project. This involved understanding reflexivity as a practice of appreciating researcher positionality in relation to the creation of knowledge, relations with research participants and others, and evaluating the research process (Corlett and Mavin, 2018). As suggested by Corlett and Mavin (2018), this reflexive approach included identifying and questioning ways of 'doing' research, understanding how the research process shaped its outcomes, reflecting on the ways in which empirical research was carried out, and communicating to others how the research process was navigated to reach particular conclusions (Gilbert and Sliep, 2009; Hardy *et al.*, 2001).

In order to consider relationships with research participants and address potential power imbalances during the qualitative interviews, the interviews were semi-structured and designed to enable participants to contribute freely and on their own terms. In addition, both the survey questionnaire and the interviews included open questions which provided space for participants to highlight issues that they felt were important for the research to investigate, and/or any other information which they felt was relevant. Throughout the process of analysis, care was taken to consider how the researcher's personal views may influence interpretation of themes in the data (Corlett and Mavin, 2018), particularly with regards to the challenges and opportunities for engagement and digital technologies. The use of online methods for qualitative research brought unique ethical challenges due to the changing nature of these issues as technologies evolve (Salmons, 2016). For example, during the research process it was important to consider the accessibility of online methods for research participants, terms of use and conduct, the potential discussion of sensitive information, the method of communication (synchronous/asynchronous, audio, text, visual, and so forth).

Particular considerations for interdisciplinary and participatory research were also highlighted (also see Trussell *et al.*, 2017; Freeth and Vilsmaier, 2020; Lorenzetti *et al.*, 2022). Most significantly, the process of framing and reframing the research (Oughton and Bracken, 2009)

- which involved continuously (re)identifying and (re)negotiating the boundaries and focus of the research - evolved as multiple knowledge types were embraced and incorporated during the research process. Throughout the project, the researcher maintained a strong disposition to working across disciplinary boundaries and engaging with non-academic stakeholders. As a result, one engagement activity often led to another opportunity to engage, which in turn led to something else. As each new opportunity for engagement and outreach arose, this helped to identify new interest groups and users of the research, establish contact with research participants, foster connections with potential academic and non-academic collaborators. As suggested by Oughton and Bracken (2009), self-awareness and continual reflexivity, as well as maintaining an openness and willingness to be questioned by (and learn from) others, was essential to this process. This cyclical and continuously evolving process was ultimately exciting, rewarding, led to collaboration with diverse stakeholders, the production of new knowledges, and helped to develop the researcher's 'way of being' and self-identity as a participatory, engaged, and impact-focused researcher (Rigolot, 2020).

3.7.2 Online methods and COVID-19

Ethical considerations relating to the use of online methods were pertinent to the research, particularly switching in-person qualitative methods to digital and remote approaches (the findings of this research are pertinent to this; see Chapter 5). Another important consideration was the ethics of conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic, which changed the way that researchers worked in the field and catalysed an important shift in terms of the ethical questions of conducting social science research (e.g., Newman *et al.,* 2021; Ruppel, 2020). This included whether to 'bother' people by asking them to take part in the research and whether it was ethically correct to conduct research on the impacts of the pandemic on people's work. Potential ethical implications were prepared for gaining familiarity with both existing and emerging regulations, guidelines, and best practice advice on conducting research during a pandemic (e.g., Lupton, 2021; Kara and Khoo, 2021). This also involved ensuring that the project explored (and was clear about the aims/objectives in the project information sheet) a topic which was relevant and beneficial to potential users of the research, i.e., that it had tangible benefits for interviewees (see Appendix C).

Digital fatigue (mental exhaustion brought on by the excessive/prolonged use of digital devices) was identified as an ethical risk during the pandemic (Gray *et al.*, 2020b; MacNamara *et al.*, 2021; Engward *et al.*, 2022), particularly during the online interviews (e.g., Shockley *et al.*, 2021, found that webcams had a fatiguing effect). To mitigate this, the duration of interviews was clearly stated to participants prior to the interview, and participants were given the option of having their cameras on or off (or opting for another form of remote interview, such as a telephone call). Interview questions were also kept open-ended to enable (as much as possible) a natural, free flowing, relaxed and enjoyable conversation.

The potential ethical implications of using automated transcription for qualitative research were also prepared for, including risks relating to data protection and the storage of participants' data. To ensure that participants were aware that third-party transcription software was being used in the research, the research explicitly considered the use of Otter.ai with regards to the ethical guidelines of both the University of Gloucestershire and the ESRC (see Appendix C for an example of the informed consent). An alternative option for transcription (e.g., manual instead of third-party automated) was provided to participants if they were not compliant or comfortable with its use. The researcher also shared lessons learned regarding the ethical implications of automated transcription (see section 3.6 and Appendix A).

Finally, it was important to consider the emotional labour involved in the research process – both for the researcher and the participants - and impacts on mental health (Seear and Mclean, 2008; Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015). Although emotional labour is often discussed in terms of conducting sensitive, personally-significant research projects (Seear and Mclean, 2008), there were specific ethical implications for this research which was conducted using entirely online and remote approaches during a global pandemic. The fatiguing effects of conducting research online, combined with widespread feelings of loneliness and isolation of the pandemic (Groarke *et al.*, 2020; Hwang *et al.*, 2020; Killgore *et al.*, 2020; Shah *et al.*, 2020), received careful attention throughout the research process. It was important to be mindful of this during the online interviews which blurred the boundaries between public and private spaces (Marzi, 2021). For example, during the interviews, both the researcher and participants reflected on their experiences of social isolation during the pandemic and the growing epidemic of loneliness. Considering the potential ethical implications of this involved ensuring a continuous process of reflexivity and attentiveness towards the emotions of participants, as well as the researcher's own emotions, position, and actions (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015). The impact of loneliness and isolation was also a key consideration for the researcher's own mental health and well-being (e.g., Hazell *et al.*, 2021), like many people during the pandemic, the researcher was socially isolated for long periods of time away from their support network including their partner, friends, family, collegues and fellow PhD students. As Cantor (2020) reflects, this is also a wider issue and loneliness can significantly impact the experiences of long-distance doctoral researchers. The impact of online and remote approaches to (qualitative) research, particularly during times of crisis and disruption, deserves careful consideration.

3.7.3 Interdisciplinarity and engagement

Engagement with non-academic stakeholders - including as an expert contributor to panels, invited presenter, organiser of events, unpaid consultant and paid contractor for a range of organisations - was central to this interdisciplinary and participatory research project. As such, a variety of different groups and organisations were involved and shaped the research at different stages, and to different extents, throughout the process. It is important to consider both the benefits gained from the involvement of multiple parties in the research (e.g., see section 3.5 and Appendix A) as well as the associated ethical challenges (Boucher, Smyth and Johnstone, 2004; Strengers, 2014).

While the engagement had numerous benefits and helped shape the research, there were potential ethical challenges which required consideration. This included: managing relationships with key non-academic stakeholders, including fostering, and maintaining trust; negotiating short-term timelines and deadlines; reflecting on who the research was being conducted for (and for what purpose); considering what counts as, and remains, privileged and/or sensitive access and information (e.g., about stakeholders and the organisations they work for); and navigating the role of negotiator and translator in research relationships. This section briefly reflects on how these challenges were navigated, while highlighting this as an important area which deserves more attention in future research (see Chapter 8). These are key considerations for research projects (especially PhD projects) which are both formally set up to involve non-academic partners (e.g., UKRI CASE studentships) and those which aren't but seek to have 'real world impact' through non-academic collaborations.

During the course of the research project, it was important for the personal goals of the primary researcher to create space to establish and maintain trusting relationships with different stakeholders and collaborators through a variety of partnership activities. This involved prioritising opportunities to engage as they emerged, managing collaborator and supervisor expectations, and continuously reflecting on successes and failures. It was particularly challenging at times to balance the need to produce results to deadlines for partners with the capacity and different stages of the PhD project (Strengers, 2014; Israel et al., 1998). Care was taken to manage expectations with stakeholders (who were often also participants in the research), e.g. not over-promise results within short-term timeframes and deadlines. It was important to be clear about what could realistically be achieved considering the available resources, personal capacity and capability of the researcher, PhD requirements and publishing timeframes. To help navigate the potential ethical issues of over-promising or failing to meet both stakeholder and participant expectations, the research process often focused on achieving 'quick wins', for example, through the publication of an evidence report (sharing key themes from the literature review), informal consultancy, contributing to invited events, organising events, and producing and publishing blog posts (sharing emerging findings from the empirical chapters), infographics and social media posts.

When involving non-academic stakeholders in the research process, it was important to reflect on who the research was being conducted for, and for what purpose. This sometimes involved changing the direction of the research (e.g., changing aspects to fit within short-term timeframes and deadlines, or to fulfil promises with stakeholders). In one instance, the dificult decision was made to edit and remove information from this thesis, upon the request of a non-academic collaborator, as the sharing of this information was identified as an ethical risk. In particular, it was important to consider what was (and what should remain) privileged knowledge durng the research process. Here, ‘privileged knowledge’ included knowledge that was gained through engagement with a non-academic stakeholder group or individual. This included knowledge about the internal workings of organisations, relationships between the organisation and their stakeholders, and other (potentially sensitive) inside information. When re-orienting and/or editing the research, it was useful to reflect upon (and at times, re-assess) the impact goals of the project, as well as the researcher’s own personal values. This was beneficial to act as a reminder of why the research was being conducted in the first place; to generate tangible outputs which were useful to potential users and beneficiaries, and to work with non-academic stakeholders to explore new questions, co-produce knowledge, and achieve impact. Reflection and careful considerations of these goals and values helped to inform, motivate, and inspire during this process.

The interdisciplinary and participatory nature of the thesis, and navigating ethical challenges, also involved undertaking the role of a negotiator and translator between different partners and collaborators. This sometimes involved working with stakeholders and organisations which had different understandings of social science and qualitative research (also see Boucher, Smyth and Johnstone, 2004; Wimbush, 1999). Contrary to other accounts of non-academic engagement, where industry knowledge and skills gaps were seen as a barrier and problematised as a ‘limited understanding’ of research issues (Boucher, Smyth and Johnstone, 2004), such organisational perspectives viewed as an opportunity for obtaining greater insight and testing ideas and findings within this research. Working with a range of stakeholders from different organisations helped to broaden understandings of the diverse actors and knowledge types involved in environmental decision-making processes, enhanced understandings of the organisational contexts within which decisions were made, and challenged the researcher’s own assumptions about the knowledge generation and decision-making process.

Ultimately, in contrast to the notion of the 'isolated and desk-based student' (Strengers, 2014) based no the idea of the 'independent scholar working free from connections with the "outside world", a disembedded and disembodied figure driven by the love of ideas, of scholarship, alone' (Johnson et al., 2000 p. 146), navigating these issues enabled more independent, collaborative, and adaptable research which was responsive to the needs of potential users and beneficiaries (i.e., through an increased understanding of organisational constraints and opportunities). This was underpinned by the researcher's own values, sense of purpose, and growing identity as a researcher who aims to create meaningful impact from their work (e.g., see Reed and Fazey, 2021).

Finally, when planning for impact-focused research, it was also important to reflect on individual contexts, privilege, and responsibilities. While this chapter describes how engagement and dissemination activities were a fundamental part of the PhD project (also see Appendix A), it is important to be mindful that these activities are not guaranteed to be appropriate, effective, or possible in all situations. When thinking strategically about impact during a PhD, it is essential to consider multiple pathways and select the options that are most suitable for the context and purpose in which they are needed (e.g., being mindful of project constraints, as well as unpredictable external events; see also Boucher *et al.,* 2004; Reed, 2018; Reed *et al.*, 2018b; Strengers, 2014). For the researcher, the main constraints were the time and resources available to carry out a range of impact-focused activities (being mindful of PhD funding and project timeline constraints), and in particular, the researcher's capacity for learning about best practice approaches for research impact as well as navigating other aspects of the PhD process.

The importance of being mindful about mental health, and the risk of stress and burning out from overwork, also became increasingly evident. This was particularly important when balancing various engagement activities alongside other research tasks, working on projects external to the PhD, conducting academic service and other research-related activities (such as attending conferences), as well as – importantly – the researcher's own commitments, personal circumstances, and health considerations. These experiences offered a learning process and opportunity to critically reflect upon how to manage (and not manage) health and well-being while conducting interdisciplinary, participatory, and impact-focused doctoral research. Mental health and well-being must be prioritised and carefully considered throughout the PhD and any research project (Hazell *et al.*, 2020; Hazell, 2022). It is also critical that these discussions go beyond a focus on the individual (e.g., placing the focus on the researcher to manage their health and lifestyle more effectively, to become more productive and/or more resilient) towards acknowledging and tackling the systemic and organisational/institutional factors which can impact mental health (including the pressure to publish, conduct impactful research, as well as deep systemic issues in academia like bullying and harassment; see Ayres, 2022). More research needs to be conducted into the impacts of impact culture on the mental health and wellbeing of researchers, particularly doctoral students and those from marginalised and/or under-represented backgrounds.

3.7.4 Privacy and security

Data gathered during this study adhered to the requirements set by the current General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR (EU/2016/679) European Union, 2018). The data gathered during the PhD project were stored on a password protected computer which was only accessible by the researcher. The data was used and stored in the manner that participants consented to before participation (see Appendices B and C). The identity of respondents remained anonymous by using participant identification codes, and the privacy, security, and data storage procedure was explained to participants so that they understood how their responses were being protected. All data resulting from the project were be archived with an appropriate data repository at the end of the project, in accordance with the funding requirements for the project.

The interview data was transcribed by GDPR compliant automated transcription software Otter.ai, anonymised, and stored in the software until the end of the research project. It is important to note that Otter.ai's Privacy Policy (https://blog.otter.ai/privacy-policy/) stated that personal data (i.e., the interview transcript) may be transferred out of the UK and European Economic Area (EEA). For research based in the UK, this is an important consideration for GDPR compliancy and interview participants were made aware of Otter.ai's Privacy Policy in the consent form and information sheet. Data remained secure when stored within the Otter.ai platform as the company is signed up to the Privacy Shield Framework (https://www.privacyshield.gov/welcome) which provides companies with a mechanism to comply with data protection requirements when transferring data.

3.8 Limitations

Each method and approach had limitations, which are explored and addressed throughout this chapter. In addition to identifying and putting steps in place to minimise the limitations of each method, section 3.7 in this chapter provided an in-depth and reflexive account of the various ethical implications associated with this interdisciplinary and participatory research that was conducted using entirely online and remote methods. As this chapter has highlighted, although a multi-stage approach to coding acted as a system of verification for the analysis of the qualitative data in this study (offering verification and a reproducible structure and process) it is important to be clear that the analysis remains subject to the interpretation of the researcher and is ultimately subjective. Where possible, steps were put in place to add clarity and weight to the qualitative data and the data collected in this research (and coding system used in the NVivo qualitative analysis software) has been safely stored to ensure that it can be retrieved if requested for further information.

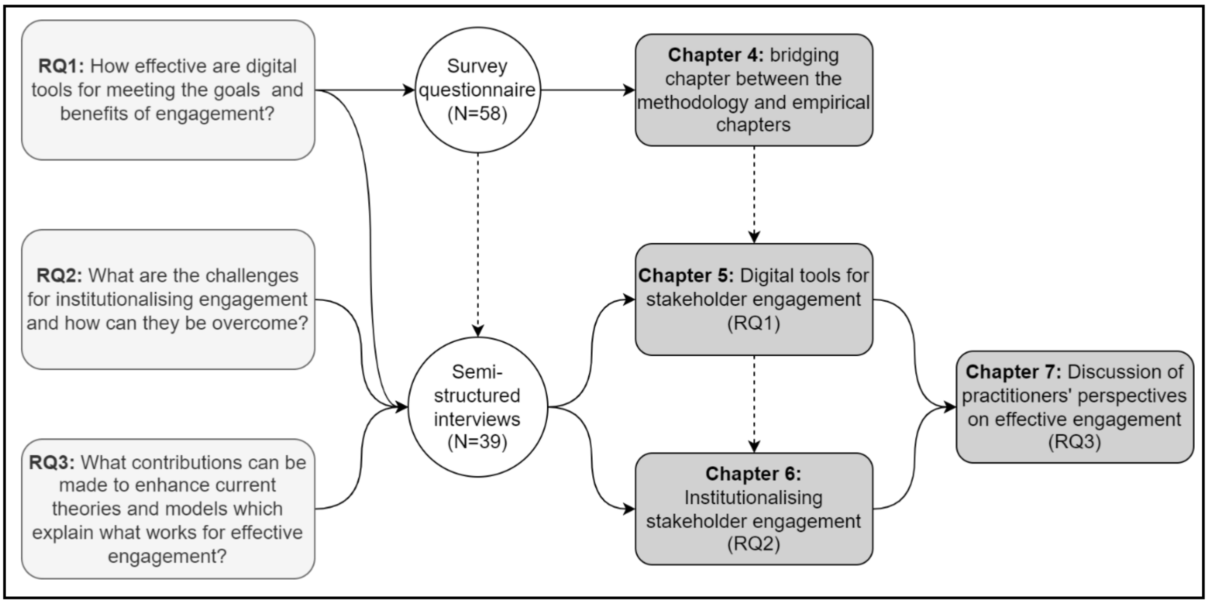
It is important to clarify some specific limitations with the methodology with regards to sampling method and bias. Due to the methodology employed by this predominantly qualitative research project, the sample (see section 3.4) is not representative of the environment and planning sectors in the UK. There were also gaps in the sample, for example the researcher did not interview any practitioners who were working in waste, water, and energy areas of the sector, which is problematic as these represent huge areas of research and practice. In addition, both the survey and interview samples were bias towards England and specifically towards the South West and London areas; as the researcher was based at a university in the South West of England, the opportunistic snowball sampling method was naturally bias towards this region and did not include many participants from Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Finally, the methods and approach employed in this study were designed to capture broad themes regarding the challenges and opportunities for conducting engagement, and as such did not differentiate between different types and/or levels of engagement (e.g., between consultation and co-production, and so forth). In addition, due to the diverse terminologies and understandings surrounding engagement (see Chapter 2) it was not realistic to conduct a systematic and representative assessment of different purposes, types, and levels of engagement within the available project resources. These gaps are acknowledged within the context of opportunities for future research in Chapter 8.

3.9 Conclusion and structure of the results chapters

This chapter has outlined the research design, justified the methodological choices, and explained how potential limitations were mitigated. The role and influence of engagement with non-academic stakeholders has been discussed and evidenced, which continuously shaped the research and involved testing and adapting the research questions and aims with potential interest groups, users, and beneficiaries of the research. This engagement directly led to changes in the research, including the introduction of a new research question (research question two). This chapter has also demonstrated how the research successfully navigated challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, learned from challenges and shared the lessons learned, and re-oriented the approach according to stakeholder need. By doing so, this thesis has shown how research can be agile in responding to current and unexpected issues. This chapter has also critically explored some key ethical implications of the research relating to researcher positionality, online methods, interdisciplinary and engaged research, and privacy/security issues.

The empirical findings from the research are presented and analysed in the following three chapters. Chapter 4 is a short and descriptive chapter that links the methodology and subsequent results chapters by including the findings of the survey questionnaire. Chapter 5 responds to the first research question (RQ1) by presenting the findings of the semi-structured interviews to explore the effectiveness of digital tools for meeting the goals of engagement. Chapter 6 responds to the second research question (RQ2) by presenting the findings of the interviews to explore the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising engagement. Chapter 7 brings the findings from the previous two empirical chapters together to discuss them within the context of the literature. By doing so, Chapter 7 responds to the third research question (RQ3) by exploring how the findings from chapters 5 and 6 contribute to existing models and theories for engagement. Figure 12 below illustrates how each of the research questions are linked to the results chapters.

Figure 12. Diagram showing how the research questions, methods, and results chapters are linked.



Chapter 4: Engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic

Box 5. Chapter summary - Chapter 4: Engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- This short, descriptive chapter presents results which bridge the methodology chapter (Chapter 3) and the subsequent qualitative results (Chapters 5 and 6).
- It outlines the findings of a survey questionnaire (N=58) which was designed to: (i) quickly gain an understanding of the research area during a rapidly changing and uncertain period of time; (ii) provide broad themes to help inform the interview questions; (iii) recruit participants for the interview stage of the project. It is not meant to provide statistically significant summaries of the relationships between the variables
- The findings indicate that before the pandemic, in-person methods tended to be more important than digital (remote) methods for engagement. Most engagement activity had been disrupted in some way during the pandemic, with survey participants reporting that they had used some 'new' digital tools and platforms for engagement including videoconferencing software and webinars.
- Four themes were produced from the survey findings which were used to help inform the questions and prompts in the semi-structured interviews. These included: accessibility and inclusion; participant experience; quality of knowledge and interaction; 'hybrid' engagement and best practice. These themes are explored in more depth in the qualitative results chapters (Chapters 5 and 6).

4.1 Introduction

This short chapter presents some preliminary results which bridge between the methodology chapter (Chapter 3) and the two qualitative results chapters (Chapters 5 and 6). It outlines the findings of a survey questionnaire which was designed to: (i) quickly gain an understanding of the research area during a rapidly changing and uncertain period of time; (ii) provide broad themes to help inform the interview questions; and (iii) recruit participants for the interview stage of the project (alongside themes in the literature review; see Chapter 2).

The survey ran from June to August 2020 and collected responses from 58 participants. Participant characteristics are included in Chapter 3 in section 3.4 which introduces the sample. The survey focused on four themes: 1) the perceived importance of digital and in-person methods for stakeholder engagement; 2) the impact of the pandemic on "usual" (i.e., pre-pandemic) methods and approaches for stakeholder engagement; 3) changes in the use of a selection of digital tools for engagement from *before* to *during* the first COVID-19 national lockdown (March 2020); 4) practitioner' thoughts, values, and experiences of the impact of the pandemic on stakeholder engagement. The fourth theme included an open-ended question which was used to produce themes to help inform the interview questions: *'Are there any important topics of questions you feel that this research project could investigate?'*. Appendix B includes a full list of survey questions. The survey was convenient and indicative rather than a following a probabilistic random sample of participants. As a result, the statistical analysis of the survey data is descriptive rather than inferential and the results do not contain any reference to statistical significance which would only apply to a probabilistic random sample.

This chapter first explores the quantitative results of the first three themes of the survey relating to the importance of digital engagement for practitioners and how this changed during the pandemic (section 4.2). The chapter then explores the qualitative results of the fourth theme which explored practitioners' perceptions of important topics regarding the impact of the pandemic on engagement.

It is important to be clear that this chapter talks about stakeholder engagement 'before the COVID-19 pandemic' and 'during the COVID-19 pandemic'. Here, 'before the pandemic' is considered to be before the first national lockdown in the UK[44] - the Prime Minister announced that 'now is the time for everyone to stop non-essential contact and travel' on the 16th March

[44] Timeline of UK coronavirus lockdowns, March 2020 to March 2021 (Institute for Government analysis, 2021): https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf.

2020. ‘During the pandemic’ is considered to be any time after this date (although restrictions have since been lifted, the impacts of the pandemic remain relevant).

The following sections present the results of the survey of 58 practitioners and practice-enablers involved in public and/or stakeholder engagement in planning and/or environmental decision-making processes. Section 4.2 provides some broad descriptive information about the impact of the pandemic on stakeholder engagement and section 4.3 explores practitioners’ perspectives in more depth.

4.2 Engagement and COVID-19

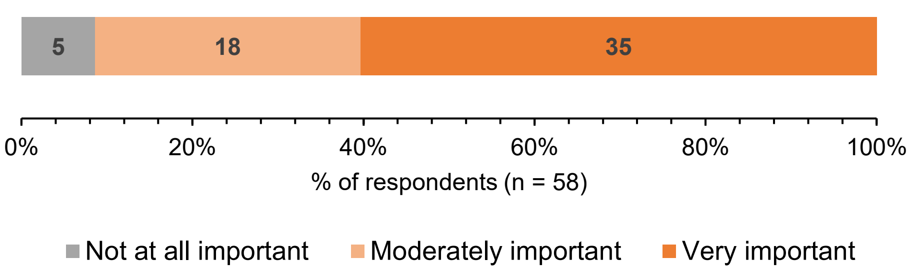
The first questions in the survey focused on three topics:

1. The perceived importance of digital and in-person methods for stakeholder engagement.
2. The impact of the pandemic on usual (i.e., pre-pandemic) methods and approaches for stakeholder engagement.
3. Changes in the use of a selection of digital tools for engagement from *before* to *during* the first COVID-19 national lockdown (March 2020).

The results are based on a small sample (N = 58) of UK practitioners and practice-enablers. As previously mentioned, the results are intended to be purely exploratory, providing a ‘snapshot’ into the experiences of the survey participants during the pandemic, and are not generalisable or representative of the UK planning and environment sectors.

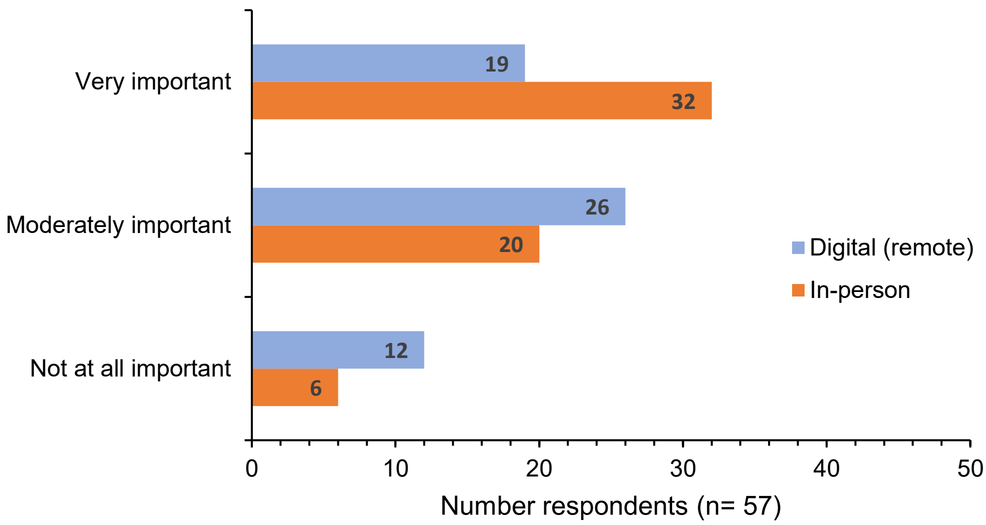
The first part of the survey explored the importance of digital and in-person methods for stakeholder engagement. In general, over 90% (n = 53) of survey respondents felt that stakeholder engagement was ‘moderately important’ or ‘very important’ in general, i.e., it was an important part of their day-to-day work Figure 13.

Figure 13. General importance of stakeholder engagement in work (before pandemic).



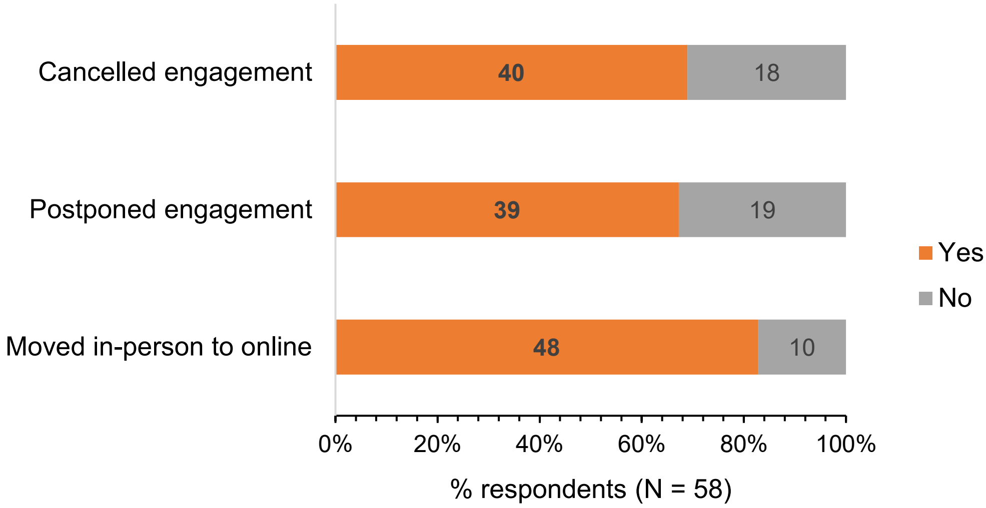
Before the pandemic, in-person methods for stakeholder engagement were more important in the day-to-day work of respondents than digital (remote) methods (see Figure 14). In-person methods were 'very' or 'moderately' important to 90% of respondents (*n* = 52), compared to 78% (*n* = 45) of respondents who felt that digital methods were 'very' or 'moderately' important. Twice the number of respondents (*n* = 12) reported that digital tools were 'not at all important' for engagement in their work, compared to those who felt that in-person methods were not important (*n* = 6).

Figure 14. Importance of in-person and digital tools for engagement in work (before pandemic).



The majority of participants had experienced disruption to stakeholder engagement processes due to restrictions put in place during the Covid-19 pandemic. As shown in Figure 15, 70% postponed planned in-person engagement (*n* = 39) and a further 70% (n = 40) had to outright cancel these activities. Over 80% (n = 48) of respondents moved planned in-person engagement activity online using different information, communication, and collaboration technologies.

Figure 15. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement.



Survey respondents were asked about what digital tools they were using for stakeholder engagement 'before' (before the first UK lockdown) and 'during' the pandemic (after the first lockdown) (Figure 16). The descriptive results offer an indication of the digital engagement tools being used in pre-pandemic times and how the pandemic might have changed things. As shown in Figure 16, respondents were using a variety of different digital tools before the pandemic, with the majority of respondents were using emails (over 80%, n = 47) and websites (69%, n = 40) to engage with stakeholders. There were some clear changes to the digital tools that respondents used to engage with stakeholders during the pandemic. Notably, the use of communications platforms (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google+, and so forth) increased by 61 percentage points, from 22% pre-pandemic to 83%). The use of webinars increased by 45 percentage points, from 22% pre-pandemic (Figure X above) to 67% during the pandemic. Table 1 (Chapter 2) provides a list of digital tools for engagement alongside examples of their use.

Figure 17 shows these changes more clearly, illustrating the increase or decrease in the use of digital tools for engagement from before to during the pandemic. For example, it is clear that many more respondents were using communications platforms (e.g., Zoom and Microsoft Teams for meetings, webinars, conferences, and so forth) and webinars (e.g., run via Zoom/Microsoft Teams or another webinar platform) during the stakeholder engagement process. From before to during the pandemic, 25 more respondents (a 61-percentage point increase) were using webinars, and 35 more participants (a 45-percentage point increase) were using communications platforms to engage.

Figure 16. Digital tools used for stakeholder engagement before and during the pandemic.

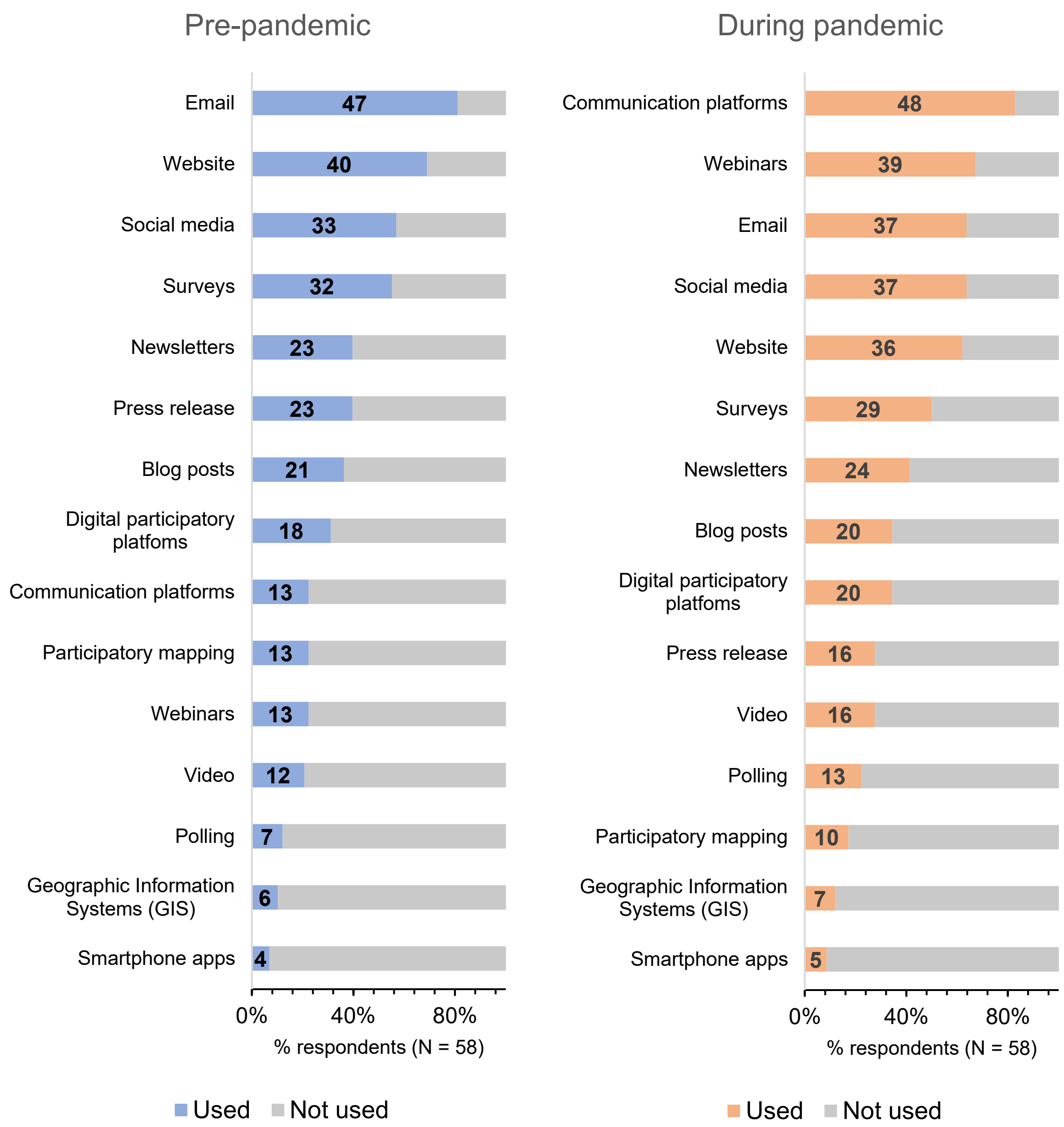
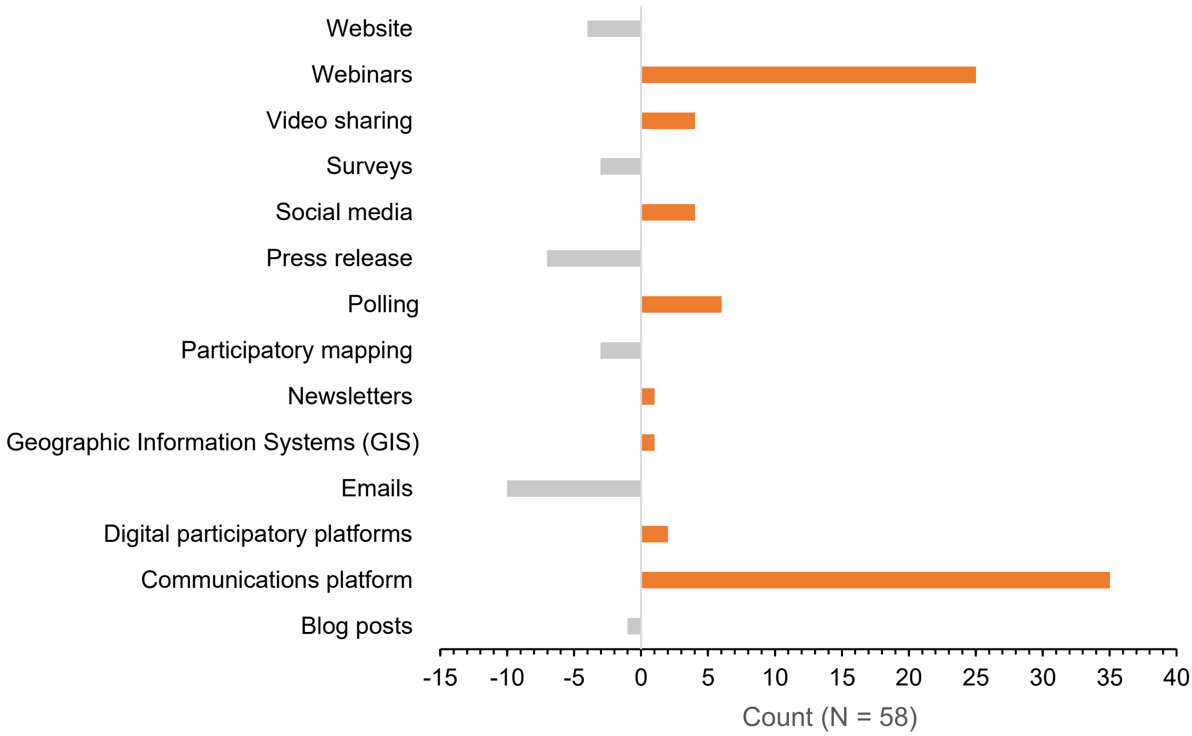


Figure 17. Increase or decrease in the use of digital tools for stakeholder engagement from before to during the COVID-19 pandemic.



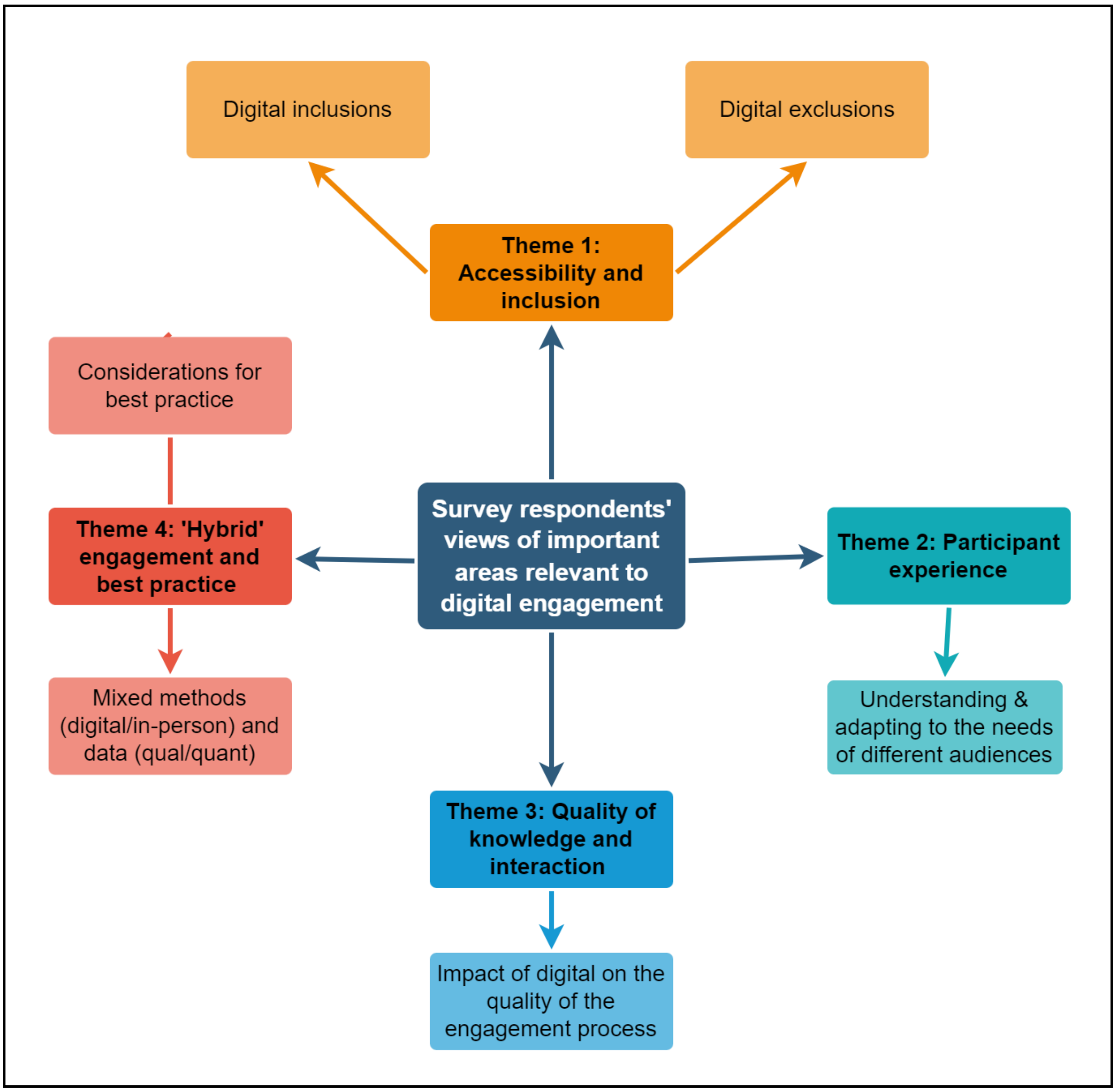
4.3 Challenges and opportunities for digital engagement

This section presents the findings of the fourth survey topic: attitudes and experiences of practitioners towards the impact of the pandemic on stakeholder engagement. This was captured using an open-ended question: *'Are there any important topics of questions you feel that this research project could investigate?'*. Out of the total 58 survey respondents, 22 provided an answer to this question. Alongside the themes from the literature review, the results were used to help inform the questions asked during the qualitative interview stage. Figure 18 shows a word cloud of the terms used most often by the 22 respondents to the open-ended question (larger words are those which were used most frequently) – frequent words include online, engagement, access, digital, stakeholder, farmers, methods, quality, reach, and so forth. Each of the (anonymised) 22 responses and associated survey participant codes (1-22) can be seen in Appendix F. The findings present an indication of survey respondents' views of the challenges and opportunities for digital engagement.

Figure 18. Word cloud illustrating the key terms in response to the question: "Are there any important topics of questions that you feel this research project could investigate?".

Participants' responses were analysed using qualitative analysis software to produce some broad themes (see Chapter 3, section 3.3.1 for details about the analysis and themes produced from the survey). The results indicated survey participants' views on important areas for this research to consider which, along with the themes in the literature review, helped to inform the research design and questions asked in the follow-up interviews. Figure 19 provides a summary of these themes, which are then discussed in more detail in the sections below alongside some illustrative quotes from participants. It became apparent that the themes were highly interlinked (e.g., responses often linked to more than one theme or sub-theme).

Figure 19. Diagram illustrating the key survey respondents' views of important areas relevant to digital engagement (n = 22).



4.3.1 Theme 1: Accessibility and inclusion

The impacts of digital tools on the accessibility and inclusiveness of engagement were identified as a broad theme. 14 out of the 22 responses (survey participants 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22; see Appendix F) discussed issues and opportunities relating two sub-themes: 1) 'digital exclusions' (i.e., situations where barriers and limitations to digital engagement result in the exclusion of particular stakeholders, because the process is less accessible to them), 2) 'digital inclusions' (i.e., situations where online engagement was more accessible to some people and resulted in the inclusion of new stakeholders).

9 responses (survey participants 3, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 22) questioned the ways that digital and remote engagement can exclude some stakeholders (and the impact of this on the engagement process). For example, stakeholders can be excluded from engagement due to lack of access to online resources and infrastructure (such as the internet) - *'How to engage online when stakeholder access to devices varies/is limited?'* (Response 12), *'I work with disabled people and they don't have access to the internet'* (Response 7). Others commented that they had to use both digital and analogue approaches to reach stakeholder groups – *'Digital exclusion. We have put extra effort into leafleting households to get vital information out'* (Response 6). Respondents were concerned about the risks and impacts of excluding particular stakeholders for the representativeness of the engagement process – *'[…] with digital, are we excluding certain segments of society?'* (Response 22). These groups can include those who are 'harder to reach' or have 'quieter' voices - *'How can we ensure inclusion and reaching seldom heard groups during physical distancing?'* (Response 15), *'{What are the} dangers of […] not reaching shy voices?'* (Response 11), *'Has lockdown made communication with 'hard to reach' stakeholders (e.g., disengaged or remote farmers) harder (even less opportunities for f2f engagement = no engagement)?'* (Response 13). Others wondered whether digital engagement methods captured a large and representative sample of specific stakeholders – *'Webinars: {what's the} true number of farmers taking part? Virtual events: {what's the} true number of farmers taking part?'* (Response 3).

Respondents also questioned whether (and how) digital methods increased the inclusivity and reach of engagement – 3 respondents spoke about 'digital inclusion' (2, 13, 16). Some respondents questioned whether digital tools had the opportunity for extending the reach of engagement and including new stakeholder groups – *'Has the expansion of online opportunities for engagement brought new audiences? Have there been many "newbies"?'* (Response 2). Others wondered whether digital engagement had made engaging with 'harder to reach stakeholders' easier – *'Has lockdown made communication with 'hard to reach'* *stakeholders (e.g., disengaged or remote farmers) […] easier (i.e., online methods {are} now more normal/acceptable {and} actually improved things?'* (Response 13). One participant described how they had successfully engaged with one groups of stakeholders who did not have access to digital technology – *'Digital inclusion is interesting; we co-designed an engagement method with a group of over 50s who don't have smart phones to help them to access […] park facilities'* (Response 16). This links with concerns about 'digital exclusion', for example when respondents described how they had used different (digital and non-digital) methods for engaging 'harder to reach' participants, or those without access to digital technologies and infrastructure.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Participant experience

Participant experience emerged as another theme from the open-ended question responses. 8 responses (1, 4, 5, 9, 17, 18, 20, 21) questioned participants' views of different engagement approaches and the impact of using particular digital/non-digital techniques on stakeholder groups. These responses are all relevant to 'understanding the needs of different audiences' (Response 1) and were considered to be linked with the previous theme (4.3.1) – accessibility, digital inclusions, and exclusions – because participants having a poor (or good) experience of engagement could increase the likelihood of them being excluded (or included) in the process. These comments were also considered to be linked to the quality of social interaction, knowledge production, and measuring 'success' during the engagement process (e.g., linking with section 4.3.3). Several respondents questioned participants' views of the value of the engagement process – *'[…] What is stakeholder / public perception {of the} quality of engagement, when online tools are used?'* (Response 5), *'If you have used more digital engagement techniques, how have the community/stakeholder responded to this?'* (Response 9). This could include considering whether stakeholders feel that they can participate more fully when engaging face-to-face, compared to online – *'How valuable is face to face engagement? (I.e., Do people feel that their opinions are awarded greater weight in face-to-face consultations compared to online only)'* (Response 4). Linked to the accessibility and inclusiveness of digital engagement, others wondered whether (and why) digital/online approaches 'worked better' or 'benefitted' some stakeholders (and could harm others) – '*[…] which communities has online engagement benefited and which has suffered'* (Response 17), *'Does digital work better for some types of engagement and specific cohorts?'* (Response 21). One participant brought up the issue of digital fatigue amongst participants in large group meetings, which is a consideration for both online and in-person engagement – regarding *'Keeping participants' attention when in big group meetings'* (Response 18).

4.3.3 Theme 3: Quality of knowledge and interaction

This theme includes responses about how digital engagement impacts the quality of the engagement process. 4 respondents (11, 14, 21, 22) questioned the perceived quality of knowledge produced and social interaction during the engagement process, including potential risks to deliberative (two-way) engagement and measuring what 'success' looks like (e.g., for both participants and practitioners carrying out the engagement process). For example, respondents spoke about the *'Dangers of losing nuance'* (Response 11) when engaging online, with others stating that they are *'Interested in the quality of the interaction […]'* (Response 19). Another quote illustrates how the perceived quality of the engagement process can be linked to the previous themes (4.3.1 and 4.3.2), e.g., how it can change depending on the context of engagement, the methods/approach used, and who is involved – *'{The} quality of engagement via the various formats in respect of stakeholder organisations and the specific contact in those organisations, including consideration of the socio demographics of the contact'* (Response 21). Others questioned the extent that deliberative engagement, which involves two-way conversation between engagers and participants, can be conducted in digital and remote environments – *'[…] {Do} online methods increase the ease with which outside organisations / the general public can engage in decision-making (i.e., not just consultation)* (Response 14), *'Deliberative engagement – with more digital, are we excluding certain segments of society?'* (Response 22).

4.3.4 Theme 4: Hybrid engagement and best practice

3 respondents (1, 14, 15) raised questions regarding the challenges and opportunities for 'hybrid' or 'blended' engagement (e.g., using both digital and in-person approaches), as well as mixed-methods approaches which capture both qualitative and quantitative information. Questions included *'Whether there is an optimum "blend" of face-to-face and online engagement'* (Response 14) and *'[…] the appropriateness of different technologies for capturing both qualitative narratives and quantitative data […]'* (Response 1). One respondent emphasised how *'digital engagement is a method but should not be the only form'* and that other methods and approaches should be considered (e.g., based on participant need and digital inclusions/exclusions, linking with sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2), adding that *'trying to get this message across {e.g., to practitioners) is tricky.'* (Response 15).

4 respondents (5, 6, 19, 21) brought up other issues which fell outside of (but are linked with) the 3 themes discussed in the previous sections. This included the challenges and opportunities for measuring the 'success' of engagement, privacy and security considerations, skills and training, and examples of best practice. One respondent was interested in the impact

of digital engagement on the quality of interaction, commenting that they found that 'success' (i.e., meeting the goals of engagement) was more difficult to measured when using online and asynchronous approaches, compared to in-person and synchronous – *'[…] I've moved some previously planned stakeholder participation online, it's more difficult to gauge its success compared to live'* (Response 19). Depending on how 'success' was measured, and from whose perspective, this could link with any (or all) of the previous three themes (regarding accessibility and inclusion, participant experiences, and the quality of knowledge and interaction in digital environments). Another respondent raised some questions regarding the privacy, security, and accountability implications of digital engagement – *'[…] I'm really concerned about privacy issues, as in corporate accountability and use of data gathered from using online tools such as Twitch, Zoom & YouTube. I'm not sure if GDPR regulations cover the use of this data?'* (Response 8). One respondent raised some questions around their capacity and capability to engage using digital tools, specifically what skills are needed, who's responsibility it is to provide training (e.g., organisations), and whether training is effective – *'What are the skills needed to use the various methods and tools effectively? Who is offering training and is it effective?'* (Response 5). Bringing together each of the four themes discussed in this section, one respondent commented that it was important to have *'Examples of good practice – {both} UK and international'* (Response 21). This highlights the utility of having examples, case studies, and frameworks which demonstrate how good practice stakeholder engagement can be carried out, particularly when using digital methods.

4.4 Summary

The survey questionnaire was a convenient and purposeful method for: providing a general sense of the impact of the pandemic on engagement; recruiting participants for in-depth follow-up interviews; and providing information to help inform the design of the interview questions.

This short chapter first provided background information about the survey participants and how their engagement activity changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that although engagement was important for the majority of practitioners included in the survey, in-person methods tended to be more important than digital (remote) methods. During the pandemic, almost all engagement activity had been disrupted in some way (cancelled, postponed, or moved online). During the pandemic, the use of some digital tools and platforms increased (videoconferencing software and webinars) while others decreased (emails, press release, website).

The chapter then explored the findings from an open-ended question in the online survey questionnaire: *"Are there any important topics or questions that you feel this research project* *could investigate?"*. This question collected 22 responses (presented in Appendix F) which were analysed to produce four themes: accessibility and inclusion (4.3.1), participant experience (4.3.2), quality of knowledge and interaction (4.3.3), 'hybrid' engagement and best practice (4.3.4). Together, these themes highlight some challenges and opportunities for digital engagement and considerations for best practice. These themes, along with other themes identified from the literature review and engagement with potential beneficiaries of the research (Chapter 3) were used to inform the interview questions for the qualitative interviews (see Appendix D). Specifically, the four themes from the survey open-ended question created 'prompts' for the interviews to help guide the discussion, while also allowing participants to talk about additional themes which were important to them. Finally, the survey helped to recruit participants for the interview stage of the research alongside a 'snowballing' approach. A total of 39 in-depth interviews were conducted with practitioners and practice-enablers involved in engagement in planning and/or environmental decision-making processes in the UK. The results of the analysis of these interviews are presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

Chapter 5: Digital tools for stakeholder engagement

Box 6. Chapter summary – Chapter 5: Digital tools for stakeholder engagement.

- Digital technology is continuously transforming participatory approaches in research, policy, and practice from local to international scales. However, there are still many unresolved questions about the benefits of these technologies and their effectiveness at addressing the goals of participation.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has added urgency to the question of whether meaningful engagement can be conducted in online and remote settings.
- This chapter contributes to the debates around the use of digital participatory technologies for meeting the goals of stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes.
- Specifically, this chapter explores the perspectives of practitioners' and practice-enablers of conducting engagement using digital (remote) approaches. This research was conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic when restrictions were placed on in-person interaction.
- Key themes were identified from qualitative interviews with engagement practitioners and practice enablers working in organisations responsible for planning and environmental decision-making in public, private, and third sector organisations in the UK.
- The findings provide insights into the challenges and opportunities for carrying out digital engagement in different situations. This includes the technical barriers and ethical debates around access and inclusivity, power relations, trust and rapport, digital literacy, privacy and security, and digital wellbeing. The data also presents interviewees' recommendations for improving effective strategies for digital engagement in the future.
- This chapter includes practitioners' views of effective strategies for engagement in the future. This focuses on more flexible, adaptable, and hybrid approaches which involve a considered selection of both in-person and online methods to suit the context and purpose in which it is needed.
- Following the participatory approach of this research, this chapter also includes practitioners' perspectives on the usefulness and relevance of the research findings for their work. Practitioners also shared their thoughts on how the research could be disseminated in an accessible way, which included producing guidance and case studies.

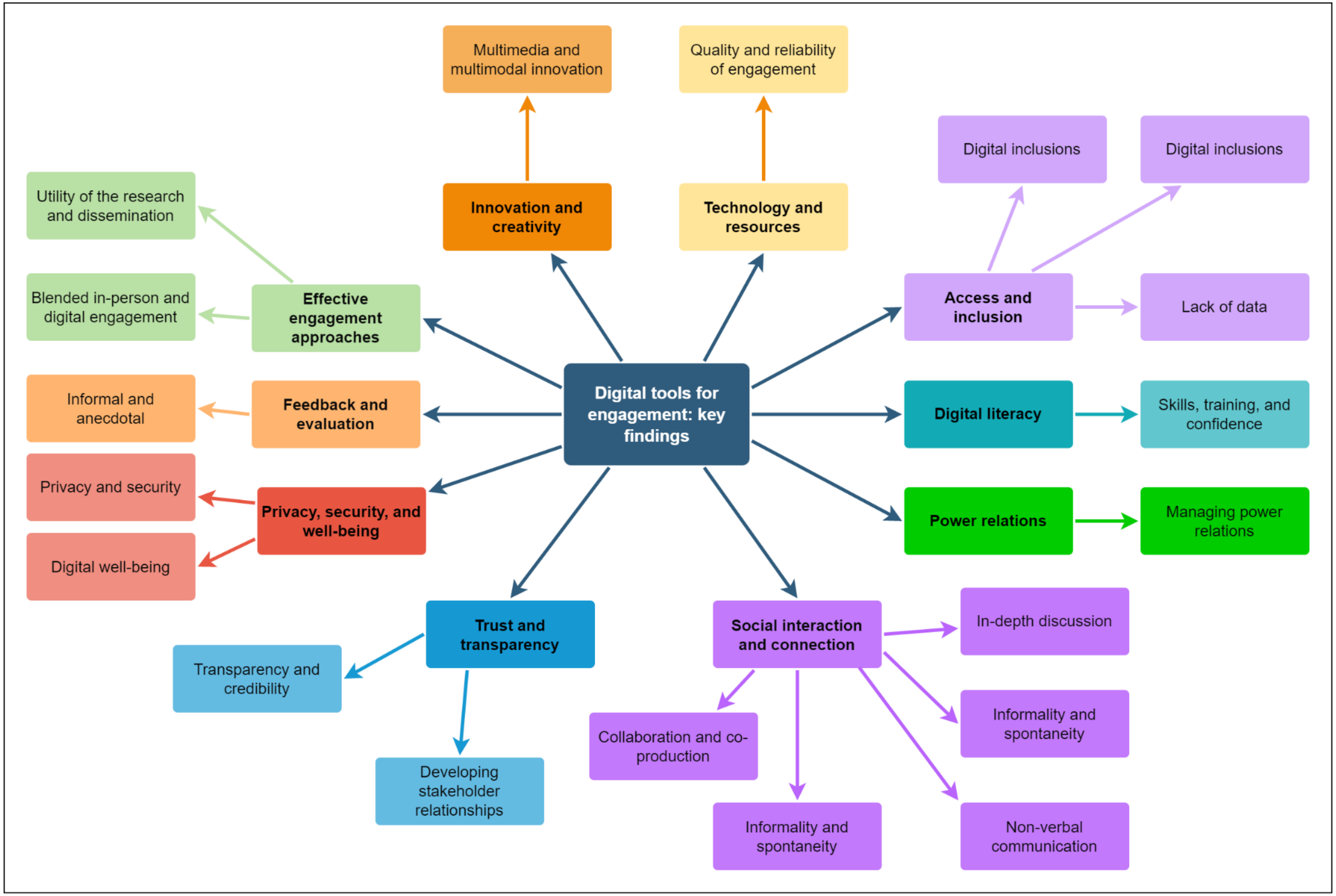
5.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the themes highlighted in the previous chapter (Chapter 4) by exploring the challenges and opportunities for carrying out engagement via digital (remote) methods, focusing on the key factors which can influence the effectiveness of digital participatory tools for meeting the goals of engagement. This includes the findings from the analysis of 34 semi-structured interviews with practitioners and practice-enablers in UK planning and environment organisations. The interviews were conducted to explore RQ1: *"How effective are digital tools for meeting the goals and benefits of engagement?".* The interview questions (see Appendix D) were informed by the survey (see Chapter 4) and the themes identified in the literature review. Each participant was involved in engaging public or other stakeholder groups in planning and environmental decision-making processes. This included work in government departments and agencies, non-departmental public bodies, local authorities, consultancies, charities/not-for-profits, and software companies (see Chapter 3, section 3.4.2 for an introduction to the sample, as well as and information about the methodology and analysis).

Figure 20 illustrates the interlinked themes from the qualitative analysis that are included in this chapter (to demonstrate these links, references are made throughout the text). This includes challenges and opportunities regarding innovation and creativity, technology and resources, digital literacy, power relations, social interaction and connection, trust and transparency, privacy and security (and well-being), feedback and evaluation. The chapter includes interviewees' perspectives on the future of effective engagement, as well as their views on the potential utility of the research and ways to disseminate the findings. It is important to be clear that while the findings highlight specific considerations for digital engagement, these are inseparable from the fundamental contextual factors and socio-economic dynamics that are key considerations for any engagement process (regardless of the tools and methods used). Specific considerations for digital engagement must be understood in terms of the broader contextual factors which shape engagement processes. Chapter 7 considers how the findings of this chapter can contribute to the literature, including existing models and theories which explain what works for effective engagement.

Another theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis, institutionalising engagement, is explored in Chapter 7. On reflection of the emerging theme 'institutionalising digital engagement' (see Chapter 6) it was decided that further exploration of this theme would make an interesting and unique contribution to the existing evidence base. This informed the development of the second research question. The findings of this part of the research are presented in Chapter 6, adding both depth and breadth to the themes discussed in this chapter.

Figure 20. Digital tools for engagement: key findings.



5.2 Innovation and creativity

This theme explores interviewees' perspectives on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their usual (i.e., before the pandemic) engagement methods and approaches. Specifically, this section includes interviewees' reflections on any changes in the tools and methods being used (e.g., new and/or different digital technologies) for public and stakeholder engagement (29 out of 34 interviewees highlighted this[45]). One key finding is that although engagers had often been using digital tools for engagement (to lesser and greater extents) before the pandemic, the majority had experienced an accelerated pace of innovation and creativity with expanded possibilities for digital engagement.

This section also builds on the survey results (Chapter 4) which revealed that before the pandemic, in-person methods for engagement for engagement were more important in participants' areas of work compared to digital (remote) methods. During the pandemic, the majority (over 80%) of survey participants had moved in-person methods for engagement to digital (remote) methods, with a large number of participants using communications platforms (e.g., Zoom and Microsoft Teams) and webinars to engage compared to before the pandemic.

The main findings of this section are summarised below in Box 7.

[45] The participant ID of interviewees are included here for transparency: PR01, PR02, PR03, PR06, PR07, PR08, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR15, PR16, PR17, PR19, PR20, PR22, PR23, PR24, PR25, PR26, PR27, PR29, PR30, PR31, PR32, PR33, PR34.

Box 7. Summary of key findings: innovation and creativity

- Although digital (remote) tools were already being used before the pandemic, restrictions on social interaction led to the accelerated the deployment of technology. This resulted in what interviewees referred to as an explosion of creativity and innovation for digital engagement.
    - The pandemic helped to open more doors, introduce engagers to new tools and technologies, and challenge the status quo of what is possible for engagement.
- Engagers reported that they had started using some digital tools for the first time during the pandemic and/or had started using existing tools in different ways. This included combining different multimodal (i.e., lots of different modes of doing engagement) and multimedia (technologies that use more than one expression of digital communication, such as audio, textual, and visual media).
- There are pros and cons for using multimodal and multimedia tools and technologies. On one hand, digital tools can help capture different types of information, create more interactive environments, and introduce elements of play. On the other hand, these tools risked overwhelming people, lacked interoperability, and were perceived as being gimmicky rather than serving a practical purpose.

5.2.1 Multimodal and multimedia innovation

The majority of engagers (23 out of 34 interviewees[46]) reflected on the impact of the pandemic on innovation and creativity in digital engagement. Engagers described the benefits and pitfalls associated with the use of some innovative tools for engagement, which included the use of different multimodal (i.e., lots of different modes of doing engagement, such as using lots of different tools) and multimedia (i.e., using more than one expression of digital communication, such as using different textual, audio, and visual media) technologies. This chapter includes examples of digital tools that had not been used by engagers prior to the pandemic (i.e., discovering new and innovative digital tools for engagement), as well as tools that were already known about and used before the pandemic but were being implemented more frequently and/or in different ways.

There was a consensus between the majority of engagers was that although many individuals and organisations were already using digital methods for engagement, the pandemic 'opened

[46] Participant ID: PR01, PR02, PR03, PR06, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR15, PR16, PR17, PR19, PR20, PR22, PR23, PR25, PR26, PR27, PR29, PR30, PR31.

more doors' (PR13), had been a 'learning curve' (PR01), encouraged people to 'find new ways to adapt and engage' (PR22), caused a 'shake up' (PR11), and made people 'much more open to the idea of digital' (PR03) than before the pandemic. As PR09 suggested, the pandemic offered an interesting opportunity to 'think about some of these creative {digital} methods and how and how they can be adapted for different situations'. Some participants described lockdown as challenging the 'status quo' of what is possible for engagement and opening up new digital opportunities, with others suggesting that 'normalised barriers to {digital} progress […] have now been removed' (PR15). Many interviewees described the impact of the pandemic on innovation and creativity in engagement in a positive way, for example, PR15 described how 'lockdown has been amazing, because […] it's changed the paradigm of communication […], people are coming together in really unique formations, and the merging of ideas is happening much quicker'. PR20 summarised these themes succinctly, describing how they were seeing some 'very creative and innovative pieces of software and ways of using them' and that the pandemic had accelerated a 'huge explosion of creativity' both in terms of the technologies and how they are being used. Similarly, PR23 suggested that lockdown had 'broadened {their} armoury of tools' for engagement. PR30 reflected that there had been increased creativity across the sector with 'more tools under your belt that you can use {for engagement}' which could help to reach new people (the use of digital tools for more accessible and inclusive engagement is discussed in more depth in 5.4)

The majority of interviewees described how they had used communications platforms (e.g., Zoom and Microsoft Teams) for the first time, or in increased or different ways, during lockdown. This builds on the survey results, which indicated that there was an increase in the use of webinars and communications platforms (see Chapter 4, section 4.2). For example, PR27 (below) described the process of how they had used online webinars to replicate 'traditional' in-person exhibitions. Another interviewee (PR01) explained that while they would 'normally run {in-person} stakeholder workshops' they were 'having to do that virtually' via videoconferencing platforms.

PR27: So we have moved all our exhibitions online. […] We did a series of four or five webinars, […] They were live, so they were recorded and uploaded to the website so you could watch them at your leisure. You can submit questions during or after, {then} we'll come back to you with answers to that... Basically, trying to move that exhibition format into a virtual environment.

PR27: […] If you think that a traditional version would have been in the church hall, or the school, we would have had some banners up, with various consultants standing around […]. But it {digital engagement} actually worked quite well […].

Consultancy

PR01 (below) reflected on the potential usefulness of three-dimensional (3D) virtual exhibitions for conducting engagement, describing how their organisation was debating whether or not to use this technology at the time.

PR01: One thing that we have noticed, and have explored, and are debating whether it's a valuable tool or not, is {3D visualisation software}. They {can provide} virtual reality fly throughs of sites, and also they have set up virtual exhibitions. So a lot of companies […] have gone into this virtual exhibition world. So basically, imagine walking into a village hall and then on the wall, there's that presentation, there that information for a project […]. There's also opportunities for […] an open, drop-in exhibition […] and people can book a time slot to have a one-to-one conversation with the team like this, so they can still have that person-to-person interaction […].

Consultancy

PR22 described how their organisation had been using 3D digital modelling in combination with webinars and online exhibitions to engage local communities in a development project. This was beneficial because it enabled them to engage with people in a way that was more accessible, comfortable, and convenient for them (accessibility is explored in more detail in section 5.4).

PR22: And I think one of the things I've been quite excited about, is that {our project has} […] invested a lot of money in getting some digital modelling done. This is the project we are having the online workshop for […] and we will also have an online exhibition in the future. […] So you're going to walk onto the {project location} essentially, and the exhibition board will be there. You know, we're always about having exhibitions in village halls because they're right in the heart of the community, but actually for some people, they don't feel comfortable stepping into a village hall of a church - that's not necessarily their natural area where they feel most comfortable. And I do think that digital is a whole area of how we can take engagement to people more. Because we can do it in a way that people can access it at a convenient time for them.

Consultancy

PR22 described some features of the 3D visualisation software (combining virtual reality, text, audio, and video) and how it could be used for more effective engagement. They reflected that this software was not necessarily something they would have used before the pandemic and that virtual methods will be used more frequently (than in-person methods) in the future.

PR22: So it {the engagement exhibition} will basically all be online, like you're stood in a public exhibition. Like virtual reality. […] So, this exhibition is from a company, […] basically you can walk up to an exhibition board and read it and then essentially, you can navigate around. […] The idea is that you can move around and go to different places, so you're not just viewing a static group of PDFs, you can actually be in the place where it's happening. And then what I am also proposing for us is that our […] {project} director would do a YouTube video {of the project site} going 'Hi everyone, welcome to our exhibition', etc., etc. So, the purpose of that would be to still have some kind of personal element […] and this will all be included within the online exhibition. You can integrate videos in the […] software to do things like this. The other cool thing you can do is fly throughs. […] So we're going to be doing something similar to this, so it's a really good visualisation. […]

PR22: It's quite interesting in terms of like, that's probably something that, historically {before the pandemic} […] But it's definitely a really good way of giving people a real concept and understanding of the project. […] I don't feel that, now, any of us want to go back to looking at a set of exhibition boards in a village hall. […] We can do it better - we can do it in more inspiring and engaging ways.

Consultancy

Other interview participants had started using (or increased their use of) digital engagement platforms (i.e., those provided by a third party company) during the pandemic. For example, PR23 (below) had increased their use of a digital engagement platform that offered multiple features and channels for communication including a central online platform and database, newsletters, videos, and 3D fly-throughs.

PR23: We have really switched very comprehensively to digital platforms {during the pandemic}, and {platform name} is at the heart of it. Through {platform name}, we have built up databases of email addresses for local people, so we've been sending them newsletters and updates about projects online. We've been asking them to participate. We've really ramped up the level of video engagements, so our architects now will do flythroughs online, which we weren't doing before. All of them have been dragged, kicking, and screaming in some cases, to doing animated PowerPoint displays, which are essentially videos, you know. So actually, it's been a real fast learning curve for us. We have had a lot of success with it I would say, but we have also learnt a lot about people's attention spans.

Consultancy

Several engagers (PR06, PR10, PR11, PR29) had used communications software like Zoom and Microsoft Teams along with polling software (e.g., Slido or Mentimeter) and other creative digital forms of engagement (e.g., gamified techniques). For example, PR06 highlighted the benefits of tools that were 'anonymized and you can type as many answers as you want, {which} gives everyone a chance to be as loud as everyone else' and can encourage participants to contribute to the discussion (which could reveal new and/or different topics for consideration). PR10 was more critical of these tools, commenting that it was a good way to 'superficially gather {ideas} […] or sort of brainstorm […] but what's the value of that?'. These points link to several of the themes discussed later in the chapter.

PR06 (below) had moved a project online and virtual methods using multiple digital tools including webinars, polling tools, and interactive simulation (gaming) software. They described how using a mix of different digital technologies helped to keep local communities engaged, with gaming tools introducing elements of playfulness and enjoyment. Several other participants (PR02, PR15, PR17, PR20) had also used gamified digital tools for engagement.

PR06: So COVID was already in full swing, so we decided to do it all digital, we were initially going to do a village hall session where we put a whiteboard up and start speaking. But actually I think the engagement we got from […] people {engagement participants} […] was higher than we would have got from a village hall session, because we used things like {polling software}, […] also we had a presentation, everyone has their own screen so actually you can see things a bit better, {and we} did a really cool thing with {interactive simulation software} […].

The {interactive simulation software} […]So that was just really nice. I think the community enjoyed that, they got to provide feedback, and successfully we managed to get two people from that project, local businesses, that want to help fund {it}, so there's obviously there's a bit of a desire to help out in that. And {the community are} keen to keep the community engagement. So I think they've responded well.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR17 (below) had been using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and instant messaging platforms (e.g., Slack, Discord, Twitch) before the pandemic, but reflected on their value as a way engage synchronously and/or asynchronously in a digital and remote environment. They suggested that these platforms offer an accessible, interactive, and sociable way to engage participants in a vibrant multimedia space. In another situation, PR02 (below) had been using VoIP, instant messaging, and livestreaming platforms, alongside video sharing and social media (e.g., YouTube), to give participants a live tour of a site which enabled them to see issues in the real world, ask live questions, and get live feedback.

PR17: […] But I do think that I might like to try a different approach to {in-person} focus groups. Something like a {VoIP and instant messaging platform} server, I think, would enable asynchronous feedback. […] It's {name of platform} basically an online chat forum. […] so, you can have your own little club, anybody can start a server. […] And what we've seen is whether it's a live stream of a talk, or a video recording, {you can have} a {name of platform} channel set up where you could chat […] and ask questions. And then afterwards, the presenter would come into the […] channel and participate and answer any questions, that sort of thing. And so it's a lovely amalgamation of online chat functions and being able to give a talk […] and actually, we've seen the numbers of people attending these talks was really high […]. It allows links, and it allows voice chat, and then text chat. And we've got different channels for 'what are you watching?', for socialising, and things like that, which is nice.

University

PR02: […] The live workshop enables you to do live stream […]and using the chat on that, and then you're getting feedback, but to be able to take it outside, I think that's the critical thing and the stuff I'm exploring at the moment as well is doing live streaming outside […]. I think it's what is essential, particularly for {education}, because people don't know what {the topic} is, {but} if you show people, you can actually show people that, it gets the idea across, and people can ask questions, and you can actually show them the answer.

Education

Finally, PR20 (below) provided another creative and interactive example of digital and remote engagement. PR20 had been involved in engagement which used a digital collaboration platform (tools which enable deliberation, collective problem-solving, and collaboration such as Miro, Mural, Google Jamboard, and Microsoft Whiteboard). This approach had facilitated multimedia forms of online communication alongside webinars and different forms of social activity (including music and coffee rooms) to help make their engagement process as interactive and varied as possible.

PR20: […] {Digital collaboration platform} is an entire meeting canvas. […] {with} links to Zoom meetings, and information, and images, and pictures. And it's very interactive, so people can move around. I attended one, and the first five minute icebreaker was a big map […], and everyone could just put a little note as to where abouts they were dialling in from. And then you can see everyone's cursors moving around, you know, 200 people. And they all gather around that. And then we move to the next bit, where people go through a presentation and share a screen, and then you go to the next bits... And then there's also a sort of a breakout room, like a coffee room, […] if people don't want to be at any of the particular breakout sessions, they can just hang out there and have a coffee and have a chat, and then go to other sessions. And then you have sort of 12 sub meeting rooms within Zoom, where people are having different conversations and moving things around. There was also a DJ and you can put music on, as people are moving from room to room, if they get lost... […].

PR20: And it's you know, {it's} small ingredients, but it's all from the perspective of - how can we make this as easy as possible for someone to engage in? And then choose the bits that they want to discuss, bits that they want to participate in, the bits that they just want to listen in, and so on.

Consultancy

So far, this section has explored the impact of the accelerated use and implementation of technology during the pandemic on creativity and innovation in engagement. This has largely considered digital tools in a positive light, focusing on opportunities for innovation and creativity through diverse multimodal and multimedia approaches. However, there are a number of risks and drawbacks associated with using creative and innovative technologies that are increasingly complex and multi-faceted. Sometimes, the most simple and low-tech approaches can be the most valuable and effective. The remainder of this section explores the drawbacks of complex multimodal and multimedia technologies and the value of simplicity.

A number of engagers expressed concerns regarding the complexity of multimedia and multimodal technologies for engagement (PR01, PR02, PR07, PR08, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR22, PR23, PR24, PR28, PR29, PR30). This included the risk of overwhelming engagers and participants due to the sheer volume of tools used or available, lack of interoperability, and perceptions that tools were selected due to gimmicks over more practical options.

For example, engagers were concerned about the risk of asking people to do much and overwhelming them (PR02, PR07, PR08, PR10, PR12, PR22, PR23, PR24, PR28, PR30). This links to the issues related to digital fatigue and wellbeing discussed in section 5.9. Although PR02 (below) spoke about the benefits of discovering and using a variety of digital tools (see section 5.2.1), they reflected that this variety was 'part of the problem' and it was difficult to use the tools in a coherent, interoperable manner. PR02 also felt that there was a risk of focusing too much on the digital tools and technologies, rather than the problem at hand and what can be realistically achieved in a given situation.

PR02: Yes, but I think this {creativity and innovation} is part of the problem. […] I'm using about six different platform suits. I'm using Twitch, Facebook, Twitter, got a website, chat, the Zoom. And I've got all this information. […] But it's piecing the information together {which is the issue}. Yeah, it's putting it into a coherent form. And I think there's a real problem with that there's a real danger with technology of seeing it as the {main} thing, that you put the technology first and foremost, rather than looking at what you're trying to achieve.

Education

PR10 (below) felt that the multitude of different digital tools on offer risked overloading people with information; they can find it 'difficult to keep up' with multimedia approaches, particularly with limited resources.

PR10: Well, I've been seeing examples and kind of pondering whether they would or wouldn't work for our purpose, and also trying to not duplicate things. Because yes, it's really easy to put stuff online, and it's there, and it's ready for people to read, but then again, there's so much for people to read, an overload of information... You may be aware of {webinar series}, they've created a Slack channel, where people can basically choose different channels according to the topic they're interested in, and carry on the conversation there after the webinars. And I think that is really helpful, but again, it takes time. And even for me, even I find it difficult to keep up.

PR10 […] You know, trying to get their {participants'} head around this software, that was yet another barrier. So really, you do need a specific type of participant to manage all of that, you know, is it fair to expect all of that without renumeration... or with limited resources...? […]

University

PR07 (below) felt that using digital mapping tools alongside other online approaches was asking too much from their participants, reflecting that it would have been easier to use mapping approaches in-person when participants can be easily guided through the process.

PR07: And we were originally going to do a mapping tool as well […]. But I think actually, it's asking people to do too much. Because it, you know, if we're asking them to kind of learn a new online thing, and take the time to think about it, and I'm asking them to take photos, and do interviews, then I think you just, you realise that you're asking too much from an individual person. And whereas, you know, if we could do it in person, and I could just sit down with someone and be like, ‘here's a map, can we go through it together?’. That wouldn't really be asking that much. […]

University

Reflecting on the potential use of 3D visualisation software, PR12 (below) commented on the value of simplicity when engaging via digital methods.

PR12: […] We’re doing some experimentation with 3D renderings and fly throughs and stuff. […] But you have to think, you know, what’s doable? Also, if you want people to respond, you don’t want to distract them too much. […]

[…] So there’s something to be said about being reasonably self-contained, and brief.

Software company

Several engagers (PR01, PR02, PR10, PR11, PR12) spoke about the risk of technology being perceived as gimmicky and lacking value. For example, PR01 reflected that 3D visualisation tools can ‘seem slightly gimmicky’ and doesn’t necessarily add value to all engagement processes in all situations. In some cases, using simple ‘low tech’ options such as PDF documents can be more appropriate (e.g., linking with PR07 above).

PR01: What our view on it is, it {3D visualisation tools} can seem slightly gimmicky, if you're not providing that additional... if it's just that you're virtually walking into a room and looking at a board, that actually would be easier to view on a PDF document, rather than a board, without having to double click... I don't feel there's any particular value in that virtual experience, I think maybe it becomes, maybe those sort of exhibitions become more valuable when you link it back to a map, and then people can... or a virtual fly through, and then they can click on certain areas and have those that more information based on that specific area.

Consultancy

PR02 (below) also highlighted the risk of selecting some digital technologies due to gimmicky features, rather than its appropriateness in the given context. Although (like other participants) the example they provide is 3D visualisation and fly-through virtual tours, it is interpreted that this issue is relevant for a broader range of tools and technologies. PR02 emphasises that while on one hand new and innovative technologies can be ‘cool’ and exciting, it is important to think about the practicality of these approaches (‘what can we use this for?’) and whether more simple methods can be more effective.

PR02: But there's a real problem, the real thing with people who are kind of quite geeky, they think “oh, this is really cool!” rather than saying, “why are we using it?”. It's much more about what they are trying to achieve. Then you need to start looking at the technology and saying, “what can we use this for?”. And I am guilty of this all the time, I say “wow, look at this, a 3d flyby!”. And I'm not sure how useful it actually was for people, but some people will find it very useful.

Case in point, I'll just show you... I use a lot of CAD {Computer-aided Design} stuff, and what I will do is use a satellite photograph. It's actually really, really useful to be able to use a satellite photograph to be able to show people “this is your land”, particularly if it's a large amount, and this is how you can move trees around on your land. […]

Education

This section has highlighted some of the diverse tools and technologies being used by engagers to carry out engagement, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many engagers were using digital tools before the pandemic, the majority reported that they were using technologies in more creative and innovative ways than before. On one hand, using multimodal and multimedia approaches was beneficial for digital engagement, partly because it helped to create more interactive and immersive environments. On the other hand, engagers found the number of digital tools to be overwhelming and complicated to navigate, with some tools being perceived as gimmicky and lacking value in practice.

5.3 Technology and resources

Box 8. Summary of key findings: technology and resources

- Practitioners experienced a range of technical issues and resource constraints including loss of internet connection, lack of access to IT equipment, lack of resources such as time and money, limited hardware functionality, poor video and/or audio quality, among other issues.
- These issues are explored in more depth in the remaining sections in this chapter.

This brief section explores practitioners’ experiences of technical and resource constraints and their impacts on engagement including loss of internet connection, lack of access to IT equipment, lack of resources such as time and money, limited hardware functionality, poor video and/or audio quality (among others). Box 8 provides a summary of the findings. All of the 34 interviewees spoke about technical issues, with the majority exploring opportunities for how they could be mitigated including allowing time for participants to familiarise themselves with the technology, providing instructions and guidance, and piloting technologies as part of a trial run. As this chapter explores, there are no purely technological issues and solutions for public and stakeholder engagement – they are rooted in contextual factors and socio-economic dynamics which influence the engagement process. This section briefly summarises some technical issues which are then explored in more detail throughout this chapter in relation to other themes (and in Chapter 6 with regards to organisational and institutional opportunities and constraints).

Technical issues were a prominent concern for all interviewees. For example, as PR04 (below) highlighted that many of their stakeholders (e.g., those living in materially deprived communities) lack access to any form of electronic communication (e.g., an internet-enabled device like a mobile phone or computer). The dynamics of these issues are discussed later in this chapter (e.g., regarding digital inclusions and exclusions in section 5.4, and digital skills and training in section 5.5). Other participants (such as PR12 and PR13 below) raised issues concerning lack of internet signal and bandwidth which can constrain people's ability to access particular tools and software.

PR01: […] You've got to bear in mind that a lot of people {stakeholders} we want to connect with, don't have any form of electronic communication at all.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR12: If you're barely got 3G and you're using a phone, that's very problematic. There's a reason why we've kept our {digital engagement} tools very, very simple.

Software company

PR13: With this modelling, it does take up quite a lot of memory, you do need quite a lot of memory to run it. So often we'll just run it at engagement events off a laptop. It's difficult to make it that accessible, e.g. so people could view it on their phones at home, because there's so much moving parts so fast. So it's quite a big file size […] But then until we find a way to streamline it and limit the file size, it's hard to share it. We did try to share it on the {council} website, but with people's bandwidth it was quite juttery and stuttery, and obviously then you get negative people comments, people go "This just freezes and pauses every second, so we don't know if it works or not". It's quite difficult. It's fairly interactive at the event, but not outside.

Local authority

Other engagers (e.g., PR01, PR02, PR03, PR04, PR06, PR07, PR09, PR17, PR18, PR24, PR29) highlighted interlinked issues relating to access to internet, IT hardware and equipment (also linking to sections 5.4 and 5.5). For example, PR02 (below) explained that effective digital and remote engagement requires good internet connectivity, internet-enabled devices, and access to resources (including money). PR24 (below) also raised an important point about digital divides in rural areas.

PR02: […] {You need to consider} digital access. You need to have broadband, which is 20-25 quid a month. You need to have a place for computer, you need to have some sort of privacy, you need to have a laptop or some sort of computer. And that's also absolutely essential.

Software company

PR29: I mean, so when they were talking about trying to get them to engage in training, and all that type of thing. And obviously, some of these communities have never... you know, they're very remote rural locations, […] you can't just throw them an iPad and expect them to engage, when that's not how they traditionally do it. […]

University

Building on these points, others raised the issue of not having an appropriate space to engage online, which was a particularly important consideration when people were working from home (e.g., PR22 below).

PR22: I also think there's a thing to consider with online engagement, with people having the space at home to engage. I don't know about you, but certainly when the pandemic first started... This is a classic example - so I my partner's working in his study, we've just accepted that he's not going back to the office anytime soon. So, he's actually got a proper desk, proper chair, proper setup. Whereas here, I've been switching between various rooms to get better internet signal. And I think there's also the element around having a clear space to actually sit and sit in focus. And I guess that applies across the board […] And I think that's important for the people that we are consulting that they understand that we're all in the same boat, in the same position.

Consultancy

Several interviewees spoke about the economic cost of some digital tools for engagement (PR06, PR12, PR15, PR26, PR27). For example, PR15 (below) explained that a lot of people do not realise how expensive it is (and what is involved) to develop digital tools and technologies.

PR15: When building technology, I think few people realise quite how expensive it is to do. [...] So if we chose an open source, which I certainly have entertained, the problem is no investor would have put money in because it doesn't have a return on that investment. [...] And you have to be very aligned to the funders' values. And that can be very, very hard to do. So, the only way to create technology that's strong, that delivers value, that's reliable, that is good quality, that hits the mark from a security perspective, it really needs to sit within a private company that is able to take on private investment. [...]

Software company

As explored in other sections in this chapter (e.g., section 5.5), engagers suggested that trialling and piloting digital tools was not only a good way to mitigate some of the aforementioned technical risks (e.g., by providing participants, and engagers, with the time to familiarise themselves with the technology, identify and mitigate any access issues, and so forth). PR22 (below) provided one example of when they had trialled and tested an online engagement session, with the aim of replicating high-quality in-person discussion online.

PR15: We could have done it {engagement} via a postal survey, but we want a proper debate about the issues and the only way to do that is face to face, so we've got to replicate that online. We did a trial run for this, which you came to, to test break out rooms and the format, and so forth. Then {the} quiz trial run gave us the opportunity to present, go out into the break out rooms and present, come back into the main room, check that we recorded it, and so on. That's the reason we did it.

Consultancy

Other interviewees, such as PR02 (below), explained that the number of digital tools available could be confusing and overwhelming for both participants and engagers (linking with some of the issues explored in section 5.2.1). They suggested that it was important to provide guidance and support for people using these technologies so that they can develop a coherent picture and strategy for digital engagement.

PR02: I think an awful lot of it really is about […] being clear about what it is that you're doing, and then pulling all the different pieces together. So {in the context of my work} I'm doing a course {online}, I'm using a website, using Twitter and Facebook, the courses are on Udemy. And then I'm using Zoom as well. And Twitch, and like the live stream, so you've got like, six

> different platforms. And it's pulling everything together in one space in one place in people's heads, […] it's having it's making it coherent for people to understand. […] It's about getting the information up, you know.
>
> *Education*

One central theme among all of the interviews was that the challenges and opportunities relating to digital engagement were not purely technological or resource-based; they are complex, interlinked, and intrinsically rooted in contextual factors and socio-economic dynamics. The rest of this chapter explores these issues in more depth, considering the impact of digital (remote) engagement on the balance of digital inclusions and exclusions, the role of digital skills, managing power imbalances, maintaining high quality social interaction, building trust and rapport, privacy and security issues, among others.

5.4 Access and inclusion

All of the 34 interviewees highlighted benefits and pitfalls of digital engagement for including and/or excluding people from the engagement process, including both participants and engagers. In this thesis, it is considered that there are a variety of contextual factors and socio-economic dimensions which can make engagement processes more (or less) accessible for some people, which in turn can make the engagement process more (or less) inclusive of particular groups and individuals (see Chapter 2). The results suggest a complex picture with no clear consensus between interviewees, who provided various examples of digital inclusions on one hand (e.g., digital tools reaching new groups) and digital exclusions on the other (e.g., groups that are marginalised and overlooked).

The findings presented in this section are summarised below in **Box 9.**

Box 9. Summary of key findings: access and inclusion

This theme is about the inclusions and exclusions which can impact the effectiveness of engagement processes, focusing on the specific challenges and opportunities for digital engagement.

- On one hand, digital engagement was perceived to me more accessible and inclusive of public and stakeholder participants (compared to in-person engagement).
    - Benefits included: reduced time and resource constraints; enabling participants to engage more flexibly on their own terms; reaching wider groups of people and new audiences over regions/time zones.
- On the other hand, digital engagement was perceived to be less accessible and inclusive.
    - Risks included difficulty engaging with ‘harder to reach’ stakeholders (the pandemic increased the visibility of those who could be excluded due to digital inequalities) and issues engaging with particular groups of people via digital means based on demographic characteristics and fundamental socio-economic inequalities.
    - It was important to use a variety of different digital tools for engagement and exploring what works best for stakeholders.
- Despite some rhetoric around digital inclusions and exclusions, interviewees indicated that there was a lack of data and/or feedback to evidence whether the engagement process was more (or less) inclusive of public and stakeholder groups.

5.4.1 Digital inclusions

This section explores situations where digital engagement was perceived to be more accessible and inclusive for public and stakeholder participants (14 out of 34 interviewees contributed to this theme[47]). For example, PR22 (below) described various opportunities of digital engagement including reduced time and resource constraints, reduced need for travel, and the ability to fit in with people's day-to-day commitments.

PR22: Yeah, my gut feeling about online engagement and consultation is that it's a massive opportunity to increase people's access to everything, really, from things like planning inquiries, to local plans... everything. Because ultimately, you're less time dependent, you know, for our online stakeholder workshop that we're planning, you've got to be free for those two and a half hours, or an hour of it. But the difference is that you don't have to travel somewhere to go to it. And our online exhibition is open 24/7, so you don't have to fit it into your day.

Consultancy

PR14 (below) described how their organisation was able to increase their reach by spending time improving their social media presence. This helped to connect with new partners, find new opportunities for collaboration, and get a wider coverage for communicating their projects.

PR14: […] We did manage to get kind of a lot more social media; I think because we were refocusing our time that we could usually have spent getting big {in-person} events up and running. […] So, we had more energy to do social media. In some ways that was good, {and} we did also get some new partners which was nice […]. Some ways that's been good for us, it's widened out media coverage. And because anyone could take part now, they kind of opened it up {for stakeholders}. […] So overall a wider coverage, that's been the really nice thing about it.

Museum

PR14 goes on to explain how trying out new and creative methods for engagement during the pandemic helped to increase accessibility for some stakeholders. While they reflect that they cannot remember the exact numbers of people who attended the event (linking with sections 4.5.3 and 4.10), they noticed that there were some attendees who would not usually come to their events.

[47] Participant ID: PR01, PR02, PR03, PR04, PR05, PR09, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR15, PR18, PR20, PR21, PR22

PR14: We did also try some new things, so we had a UK Zoom event. So it was about trying to recreate that physical vibe, so people could come and talk to scientists. […] I can't remember the numbers of attendance on it, but it did feel like there were people there who we normally wouldn't see. There were people popping in who thought it might be a family event, which we weren't really, but it was nice to see the appetite for this - people did want to try and bring their families along. So yeah, it definitely made us think that, although hopefully we can go back to face to face events next year, it's worth having some kind of virtual event just to increase the kind of people who can take part.

Museum

PR18 (below) also felt that new and/or different participants attended a digital engagement event, compared to if they held it in-person. This was partly due to the benefits of digital and online tools for bringing people together over geographical regions, without the need for travelling. The majority of engagers also spoke about the benefits of digital engagement for connecting stakeholders over large geographical areas, as well as fitting in with their personal lives and other time commitments (also see section 5.3). While many engagers had a feeling that digital engagement was more accessible for more people, it was often unclear whether this was supported by data on participant representation (i.e., specifically which groups and individuals were more included in digital engagement processes; see section 5.4.3).

PR18: I don't think we had a smaller group compared to if we'd done it in person, in a room. Actually, potentially, we had more people turn up. I kind felt that partly because they had to switch their operations anyway to work from home, so everyone's kind of used to it, and there are less commitments as well. But yeah, I think people were quite engaged and it went reasonably well. Because you could have one of us on the lookout for people who perhaps weren't talking quite so much, and then you should bring them into the conversation. I don't know if that felt more direct than doing it in the room. […] I think we've got some really good discussion points, actually. I don't feel like we just got much more out of {physically} being in the room, actually. I think, again, because it was quite a diverse group... We had people from {regions all over the UK}, which we wouldn't have been able to do in person, not all together.

Government department

For PR15 (below), the pandemic and rapid shift to digital engagement led to more cohesion between more diverse groups of people. In the situation described below, their organisation was able to run events which brought together stakeholders who 'wouldn't naturally come together in a conversation' and increased opportunities for collaboration. They reflect that having online meetings helped to bring stakeholders together across large areas, which PR15 viewed as essential to help resolve some pressing issues in their sector and to enable more effective engagement in the future.

PR04: Yeah, well, what's happening {during the pandemic} […], it's going to be a combination of {stakeholders}… the stakeholders are very different, they're all part of the same value chain, but they all hold different place in it. Now, that's an unusual formation of individuals, and they're all scattered over different areas […]. So, they are all within the same sphere of {environmental topic}, so there is a common vision and set of values**.** But they wouldn't probably naturally come together in a conversation. Yeah, the {advisers} people stay with the {advisers} people, the water people stay with the water people, you know, the farmers stay with the farmers. And now this is very much more, right, let's just get that whole thread together, because they all need to work in cohesion.

Software company

Some engagers suggested that digital engagement was more accessible than in-person for particular demographics of people to attend. PR05 (below) explained that online meetings were not only more efficient from a business perspective, but more older people were also able to attend more easily online than they would have in-person. PR13 also found that digital engagement helped to keep older people involved throughout the pandemic as it enabled them to engage from the comfort of their own homes.

PR05: Personally, to be honest, I have found that there are a huge number of positives in working in this way {digital and remote}, compared to working face to face. I think, you know, obviously, face to face interaction is vital for societal cohesion, and for individuals' mental health. And I surely miss it. However, from a business perspective, an hour-long meeting takes an hour, sometimes it takes 45 minutes, in fact, because they're more effective and efficient, less small talk, less talking over one another. And I also find that doing things on Google Docs can be better than a whiteboard, actually. And I definitely have heard from all stakeholders and noticed that you get more senior people come to your meetings, because they don't have to travel 45 minutes to get there, so they can come for the first 20 minutes if that's all they can afford, but it means you get more buy in from the people you've invited.

Charity/not-for-profit

Several participants attributed increased accessibility to the increased convenience of engaging online compared to in-person (PR02, PR13, PR14, PR18, PR22). In the quote below, PR13 described how some stakeholders were more able to engage ‘when they have the time’ online. For this reason, their organisation had focused on increasingly embedding digital approaches in their engagement strategies.

PR13: Just in the last year or so, we've tried to push more of the digital aspect. It makes it more accessible for some people as we're discussed before, for example timings in the day - if you have consultation in the evening, you could lose out on engaging people with the scheme. Then you can have people saying "I couldn't make any of your events! I didn't get a chance to speak!". So, moving stuff online, you are giving people the chance to access it when they have time. So, we often have the in person engagement events, and then leave the consultation online afterwards for a month. Then we'll Tweet about it, or have a sign, and people will see it and think "oh, I can still access it".

Local authority

Other engagers suggested that online engagement can be more accessible for particular groups and individuals based on factors such as age, gender, disability, ethnicity, and socio-economic background. For example, PR14 (below) commented that neurodivergent and disabled people can find it easier to engage online without the need to travel and attend in-person events (the benefits of online engagement for people with disabilities was also mentioned by PR17). Different digital exclusions based on participant demographics (and ways to overcome them) are discussed in detail in the section below.

PR14: I'm quite enjoying it {digital and remote engagement} from a personal point of view. We do have quite a lot of kids in {our project} who are on the {autism} spectrum, who can't go to these in person events, so online really does open up opportunities in that respect.

Museum

This section had explored some of the factors that can make digital engagement more accessible and inclusive to both participants and those responsible for carrying out engagement (e.g., staff members and organisations). The next section explores some of the factors which can make digital engagement less accessible and inclusive for participants and those responsible for carrying out engagement.

5.4.2 Digital exclusions

This section is about digital exclusions that are rooted in wider socio-economic inequalities (14 out of 34 interviewees contributed to this theme[48]). Interviewees provided examples of situations where digital engagement was less accessible and inclusive of public and stakeholder participants, and other situations where those responsible for carrying out engagement (e.g., staff members) were excluded. Interviewees frequently used the term 'harder to reach' to refer to those who were (or could be) excluded from the engagement process. For the interviewees, 'harder to reach' was difficult to define and could mean different things in different contexts. It is important to be clear that while there can be some specific factors which make digital engagement more (or less) likely to exclude particular groups and individuals, there are wider socio-economic inequalities which are intrinsic to all engagement processes (regardless of the methods and tools used). The majority of engagers (and the organisations they worked for) were actively trying to understand the most effective and inclusive ways to engage with 'harder to reach' groups and individuals. One key message from this section is that there is no one-size-fits all approach, tool, or method: regardless of the digital and/or in-person methods, some people will always need more support to engage (and/or engaging with in different ways) than others.

The majority of engagers spoke about (potential) engagement participants that were 'harder to reach' either in general (regardless of the tools used) or increasingly so due to the use of digital tools. Several engagers (and the organisations they worked in) were interested in identifying harder to reach groups and experimenting with the best ways to engage with them (PR06, PR07, PR09, PR13, PR18, PR20). PR06 (below) explained that the pandemic and lack of opportunity for in-person engagement had made them increasingly aware of who was harder to reach, and they had started to think about alternative ways to engage with them (e.g., via telephone).

PR06: […] So I think that there's definitely been a variation in how people have responded in terms of the farmers to COVID, and a lot of the ones using technology already have been very happy with it. I think the others, personally, I'm going to give a number of them a phone call, because I feel like they're disengaged […]. Because, for example, Zoom is easy if you've got the technology to do it, but if you haven't got a laptop with a webcam or internet connection, it's quite hard. So, I think, I do need to phone them […].

[48] Participant ID: PR01, PR02, PR03, PR04, PR05, PR09, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR15, PR18, PR20, PR21, PR22.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR29 (below) provided an in-depth account of their understanding of what ‘harder to reach’ means in the context of their work and explained that one key (mis)understanding about ‘harder to reach’ stakeholders is that there are particular characteristics (such as age) which can make it more or less likely that they are harder to reach. This is a generalisation which risks overlooking nuances and can lead to false (and potentially harmful) assumptions. As the subsequent quotes in this section explore, it is not guaranteed that a particular (digital/remote or in-person) approach will make it harder (or easier) to reach particular groups and individuals. The key message here is that it is not always helpful to think about digital inclusions and exclusions in terms of binaries (e.g., ‘this person is more likely to be engaged because of X factor’, or ‘this person is less likely because of Y factor’) or particular methods (e.g., this digital and remote tool is more likely to include X group and exclude Y group). It is more important to think about the context in which these tools are used.

PR29: So, the harder to reach concept came about looking at medicine, social science, even marketing and stuff like that, and how to engage with them. And, you know, previously people have gone on this like, diffusion of innovations principle, which is that - oh, if you just target the usual suspects, those actors, those early adopters, then eventually the information from it will trickle down, and everyone will know. And it'll take some time, but that's what will happen. And what the harder to reach theory says is that, actually, if those communication pathways aren't there, if there's no incentive for those early adopters to pass that information on, then they're not going to necessarily get it. And the divide is going to get bigger. So that was the premise.

PR29: […] And then in terms of demographic characteristics […] it's a lot easier to identify people based on whether they're male or female, if they're old or not, all those sorts of things... Because they're easy to point out, there's statistics on it, census data, or whatever. So people previously have tried to attribute harder to reach characteristics, or who is harder to reach, based on those demographics because it's easier to do - you know, ‘it's generally older people’ or ‘it's generally this’. But the problem with that is, it's a range of massive issues, and it's to do with past experiences and that sort of thing. So it's not necessarily those things. It can lead to generalisations and mean that you're missing out a lot of people because you're basing it on false assumptions.

University

The majority of engagers were exploring ways to identify and engage with harder to reach groups, particularly with regards to digital inequalities and exclusions. For example, PR18 (below) explained how their team/organisation were trying to figure out how to connect with harder to reach stakeholders by understanding the underlying factors (e.g., socio-economic dynamics) which led to digital inequalities and exclusions.

PR18: That's something that we think about quite a lot, trying to work out how best to reach people. I don't know if we've actually cracked that one, honestly. […] So, whether that's geographically, or whether they don't want to engage with government, or whether they lack IT or other infrastructure. So, we look at whether there are access issues, or whether they are not willing to engage at all, and that kind of thing.

PR18: […] I think it depends massively. I feel like almost every conversation that we have, there's always an element that will say "we can do this online, but there will be a paper option", because there will be people you won't be able to reach […] One of the major things we're trying to understand […] is how well we can engage with those who either don't have access, or aren't as comfortable using technology. I think that that's something that almost always sort of comes up in our {work}, whenever our team gives insights to policy, it's like "if you're going to give advice, guidance, access to a portal, or whatever... there will always be a small group who can't access these things.

Government department

For PR07 (below), finding the most appropriate methods to reach stakeholders was about 'making the best of it that you can' by first identifying those who are harder to reach, then exploring the ways that they can be targeted. They also reflected that it can be difficult to find out who is harder to reach (linking with the issues regarding lack of available data on who is harder to reach explored in section 5.4.3). Those responsible for engaging can make the process as accessible as possible (e.g., through trialling different digital and non-digital methods), but ultimately there is no guarantee that those who are harder to reach will be included (see section 4.10 on issues related to evaluating engagement). PR07 also raises the fundamental point that 'there's always going to be difficult to reach groups' regardless of the situation (PR16, PR22, PR29, and PR02 also raised this point). Another participant, PR16, commented that although it was tempting to use digital tools to reach stakeholders it 'doesn't really get to the heart of the problem'.

PR07: […] {engaging with harder to reach stakeholders} it's really hard. And so, you know, I've also said that I'm happy to talk to people via the phone and not have that video aspect if they don't have internet access, or the bandwidth isn't good enough. In which case, you know, I can phone them so it's not costing them anything. But I think I think, whatever approach you have, […] there's always going to be difficult to reach groups. And that's always going to be a problem. And having to everything virtually definitely makes those barriers higher and more difficult. But, yeah, it's about making the best of it that you can. Because it's a smaller project, I'm hoping that I have that ability to then say, 'Okay, I definitely am missing like this group of people', if I was going to roll this out to a bigger project, how would I then find them?

University

Interviewees provided specific examples of situations where particular groups and individuals were excluded (or had the potential to be excluded) in digital and remote engagement processes. The most frequently mentioned factor to consider with regards to digital exclusions was age (PR01, PR03, PR04, PR05, PR07, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR17, PR19, PR20, PR22, PR23, PR24, PR28, PR30). Other factors mentioned by engagers (but to a much lesser extent than age) included gender, disability, class, and ethnicity (PR09, PR10, PR11). For example, PR11 explained how digital engagement can blur the lines between public and private spaces ('everyday life impinges on what you're doing on a screen'), which can further gendered issues in people's home and work life). Engaging with older people was a particular concern for PR07 (below). However, as indicated throughout this section, although participant characteristics (like age) can indeed be a key factor to consider when engaging online, it is unhelpful to make generalisations (e.g., older people are more difficult to engage than younger people) - the reality is messy, complex, and inequalities are rooted in wider contextual and socio-economic factors.

PR07: Yeah, so I haven't started my {stakeholder} interviews yet. So I've got a few people lined up, […] But I suspect it {inclusion} will be a real issue. And I think it probably be an age issue as well, I'd imagine. I think it'll be an older group that I'm gonna struggle to talk to.

University

In the quote below, PR01 reflected on some of the reasons why older people might be more difficult to engage online, including digital skills and access to adequate IT equipment.

PR01: […] I think my colleagues had real challenges with […] getting some of the older generation up to speed on all the IT stuff. […] so some of these people obviously won't be able to engage. But I think another thing that we found is, we had a trial run for this event the other day, […] But with {an older person who participated in the trial}, she has an old computer, so she hasn't actually got all the video and microphone capacity on it. So, people might have the internet and they might have a computer, they can't necessarily engage like this {Zoom videoconferencing}, because they haven't got the right IT. And even when we sent her Zoom invites, she couldn't seem to click the right thing to get on.

Consultancy

PR10 (below) described another specific situation where younger stakeholders were likely to be more 'switched on' digitally than the older generation.

PR10: Because I do a lot of research with farmers, I try to get a range of farmers involved, so young to old, you know, different farming systems, etc. And some of farming sector, especially younger people, and dairy, are very switched on, and they're using different technologies, and they probably wouldn't have a big problem engaging with online methods. But if you come into the older generation, I mean, you often find that split, the man on the farm, and his wife does the books, or it's the daughter, somebody does the books, or the son does the online stuff... So, I wouldn't be able to engage with those people if I had chosen an online approach, right from the start.

University

While participant characteristics like age were an important factor to consider, the majority of engagers made it clear that there was no simple message around digital inclusions and exclusions – it completely depends on the context and people's individual circumstances. Interviewees provided examples where older people were more likely to want to engage digitally, could develop their digital skills through engagement, and were enthusiastic about engaging online to help combat loneliness and isolation amongst older communities. For example, PR05 was 'surprised by how much better the senior stakeholders have taken to this {digital engagement}'. PR03, PR09 and PR12 explained how age-related digital skills can be linked to people's socio-economic background and professional experience, for example PR03 described how they were more skilled and confident to use digital tools due to their previous career working with technology.

Interviewees also explored pros and cons for engaging with younger people. On one hand, they felt that engaging with younger people via digital means (e.g., gamified techniques) was more effective than in-person methods (PR12, PR14, PR17, PR22, PR23), particularly when the tools and methods could be personalised to children and young people's interests. For example, PR22 (below) explained how moving engagement online could increase the potential to reach more younger audiences.

PR22: And the other thing I think about everything being online, is that children will be more involved. You know, planning is one of those difficult things because children don't necessarily understand things in adult terms, but I still think that their inputs, and their thoughts, are important. You know, my daughter's nine and she has some fairly strong views about the world she wants to live in. You could imagine a teacher saying "Okay, guys, let's watch this fly through, or access this online exhibition". I have also had teachers bring school kids down to a face-to-face event, and it's been great, but I do think that there's a whole chunk of people from their teens to early thirties, who might not have the time to come to an actual event. But they might have more time to join in online.

Consultancy

On the other hand, others had struggled to reach out to younger people online (PR28, PR30) and has sometimes relied on in-person interaction (e.g., visits to schools and community centres). For example, PR28 found that younger people weren't engaging with a particular digital tool and they reflected that this might be symptomatic of wider trends around a lack of interest among younger people in engaging.

PR28: Interestingly, and I'll keep referring to PPGIS {public participatory GIS} because it's the only example I've got, but we actually found that younger people were not engaging with it properly. I wonder if that's a wider issue of younger people just not engaging... But I think any kind of engagement, there's a certain 'type' that gets involved, you know. Lack of interest, maybe.

Non-departmental public body

The majority of engagers reflected on how digital engagement can enhance technology-related disparities which are rooted in wider socio-economic inequalities. Interviewees spoke about various issues and opportunities for engaging with 'harder to reach' groups and individuals from areas which are materially deprived, have poor access to the internet, low social cohesion, or are vulnerable, disenfranchised, marginalised, and/or face socio-economic inequalities (21 interview participants raised these issues and described ways to overcome them: PR01, PR02, PR03, PR04, PR05, PR07, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR17, PR19, PR20, PR22, PR23, PR24, PR25, PR28, PR30). The key message is that there are a combination of interlinked local contextual and socio-economic factors, which are dynamic and continuously changing, that can influence people's ability to engage, as well as present specific considerations for digital engagement.

Interviewees discussed challenges and opportunities for engaging with particular groups of people via digital means based on demographic characteristics including age, gender, disability, class, ethnicity, and so forth. For example, a key concern for PR01 was how to engage with people in deprived areas wo may have unequal access to the internet and IT equipment (linking with section 4.3).

PR01: […] We're in the process of organising {an engagement event} in a more deprived housing estate. Again, it's sort of like you're trying to do what you would have done person-to-person but trying to make it more engaging. So, when you're looking at a deprived area, one of the key things is what is people's internet access? Like are they all on pay as you go mobile phones, for example - they can't sit on Zoom for an hour and a half on a workshop meeting. And that's if they've got the right iPhone or smartphone that they could do it on {Zoom videoconferencing}. So it's all about understanding what IT equipment people have actually got to be able to engage appropriately, if you're trying to set up all these digital online learning platforms.

Consultancy

PR09 (below) had identified the need to adapt digital content to work on mobile devices in order to engage with people who have limited access to the internet and IT equipment.

PR09: And there's a few considerations that we have to think along the way about how to do that {digital engagement}, and what implications that will have for the sample. So one is around the sample, which may favour younger audiences, with good Wi-Fi, and those who are able to take part in the survey. And but it also has implications for how we designed that {digital tool}, because it needs to be optimised for mobile devices. And research has shown that certain ethnic minority groups are much more likely to engage with digital content on a mobile device, as opposed to a PC or laptop. So we really needed to be mindful in how we worded those questions, so that response options are kept very short, otherwise they would fall off a mobile screen. […] So we really needed to be mindful of all of that and think about the implications for that.

Non-departmental public body

In contrast to some other participants who had effectively used telephones to engage with harder to reach stakeholders (e.g., PR06), PR09 (below) reflected that reaching out to stakeholders via some non-digital methods (e.g., the telephone, as used by other interviewees in this section) was not always suitable for participants and there is no guarantee that engagement will be accessible for them. They highlight that understanding participants' views and experiences is an important (but often overlooked) starting point for engagement (linking with sections 5.4.3 and 5.10). To illustrate this complexity in another example, PR20 explained that their participants (older residents) preferred to engage via text message on their mobile phones (as opposed to telephone calls or letters) because it was perceived to be less of a security risk (the residents were concerned about being scammed) and less invasive to their personal life. This emphasises the importance of first understanding participants' needs and preferences, and then adapting the engagement process and methods used accordingly.

PR09: […] And I'd forgotten that was one of the challenges that came up, actually, in trying to connect with some of these hard-to-reach groups that we were looking for in these deprived communities. And, and there was sort of a sense from some, some parties that, you know, we'll just call them, and we'll do an interview over the phone. But actually, you know, lots of these people are pay as you go phones, or as you say, limited credit. And it's just, that's just not what happens in these communities. And actually, having a better understanding of this is so important, we come to research quite often with such a privileged view. And understanding different ways of knowing the world, different voices and how they're connecting with the world, you know, it's such an important starting point that often gets missed.

Non-departmental public body

As PR04 suggested, the reality of digital and socio-economic inequalities was a 'rich' and 'messy' picture; poverty does not necessarily correlate with digital inequalities, and it is important to be aware of the needs of different groups and individuals and adapt the engagement approach according to what works for the participants.

PR04: […] So we try to cater for different age groups with different media, and different, if you like, abilities, but when we're dealing with […] poverty, you got to bear in mind that a lot of people we want to connect with, don't have any form of electronic communication at all. I'd say we've got about 40 volunteers […] {and} probably half of those can't read. So there's a limit to what you can do with social media, when you're dealing with impoverished sections of a community, be that educational, or food, or what have you.

PR04: […] So you're kind of forced back into what actually works. Although that said, a lot of homeless people even have mobile phones, and they become much the dominant means of electronic communication rather than computers or tablets. Some of our homeless people actually have card readers for electronic begging, in immediate terms. So, poverty doesn't necessarily correlate with electronic deprivation. But it can do as well so, you have to try and pick up those things. So rich, {and} messy at the same time.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR12 emphasised the importance of understanding the contextual and socio-economic factors that are fundamental to digital inequalities and issues in wider society. They explain that inequalities are not static, and it is important to understand these issues as dynamic, interrelated, and continuously changing.

PR12: So, there are various situations where you've actually, I think, maybe spent a lot of money on face to face. But I still want a collection tool that has the advantages of a really convenient user interface, that also enables people who work at home, to go online, and do the same thing. But it has the transparency and visibility. So, there's a whole combination of factors... And it's not static. You know, I was saying earlier about age and access, it's a very dynamic and changing field. […]

Software company

Building on the above points, PR25 (below) raised another fundamental issue that it cannot be assumed that there is a willing (and able) section of the public or local community ready to be engaged with.

PR25: I feel that that's because, in {urban area}, there's a culture and legacy of... It's a {area} high levels of deprivation, there's a feeling that people don't necessarily have the time to participate and to take the leadership of regeneration in their areas, in the way that you might in more affluent parts of {city}. So, things like neighbourhood plans, you'll find them in the nice, leafy, middle-class suburbs, or in more affluent central {city areas}. But in {another urban area}, no one has the time, or energy, or space, to do a neighbourhood plan - we have more pressing, urgent concerns. Or that's the perception anyway. […]

Council

Several participants were exploring ways to engage with those who were harder to reach (PR06, PR07, PR09, PR13, PR18, PR20, PR29, PR34). For example, PR34 (below) highlighted the importance of managing expectations about what (and who) could be included during the engagement process (e.g., including factors explored previously in this section) which involved writing clear guidance and instructions for their team (also see Chapter 6, section 6.4). They raise the important point that remote 'doesn't necessarily mean digitally' and emphasise the important of using hybrid methods.

PR34: I think that what we've tried to do address is to […] manage expectations in terms of {who is} being invited {to become involved in engagement}. I think there are, I think that there are a number of divisions that the digital realm can accentuate. That kind of an external access to it. And that's very much along kind of race lines, and class lines, and gender lines, even age lines. And, and I think that one of the things that is important to do for our roles {as engagers} is provide […] like a kind of written explanation that frames what we're expecting and what we're not expecting from this project. And I think to be able to do that clearly and communicate that clearly to the client or to whatever is driving the project. […]

{And} In terms of how we {engage} people, I think there's a lot of things that you can do remotely {that} doesn't necessarily mean digitally. […] And so, I think that's a testament, that kind of intermingling between the digital and the physical, really, and like how utilising one doesn't exclude the other and vice versa?

Consultancy

PR13 (below) talked through the different methods they were contemplating in their organisation to engage with harder to reach stakeholders during the pandemic (including distanced in-person visits, telephone calls, and priority hours), including the benefits and drawbacks of each option. They emphasised the importance of looking at different (digital and non-digital) options, weighing up the pros and cons within the context in which they are needed, and experimenting with different ideas. In other interviewees emphasised the importance of making technology work for specific stakeholders (PR29) and finding the most appropriate methods by first identifying those who are harder to reach, then exploring the ways that they can be targeted (PR07).

PR13: Well, actually, we always used to do letter drops to get information out. […] but then we thought that might be quite costly and quite time consuming […]. Then we've also got the option of people ringing you, so you can capture their opinion that way... It's difficult because that can be time consuming, but you also might not capture everything that they're wanting to say. […] We also thought about doing something a bit like a supermarket priority hour, so people could come in for an hour, […] but then it could be difficult, we discussed, that someone could turn up and say 'oh, well it's the only hour I am available' and we might have to turn them away... So it kind of defeats the object of having a priority hour is anyone just turns up, but also you don't want to stop other people from getting to the consultation, because that destroys the open and honest process of consultation. So we are looking at options, it's just almost like playing with different ideas and seeing what happens, discussing it and thinking about whether the idea is robust […].

Local authority

Drawing on a project which aimed to increase residents' access to a local park, PR20 (below) provides an example of how older people were meaningfully engaged by using a combination of both in-person and digital (remote) approaches. Following in-person workshops and feedback sessions with older residents (i.e., asking them how they would like to be engaged with), their organisation co-created the engagement process with residents to use text messages to keep them updated about events at a local park. This approach helped them to co-create a tailored engagement approach with older residents based on their needs, requirements, and preferences (the challenges and opportunities for co-design and collaboration via digital and remote means is discussed in more detail in section 5.7.5).

PR20: And so, we started off with physical meetings {with older resident stakeholders}, a series of workshops, for co-designing and co-developing a solution to that problem. That went through three workshops, with discovery, and exploration, and then evaluation after the project. […] And yeah, the findings from that project were brilliant, because people could say 'we got this information in a way that was accessible to us, and we were able to use it, and were more likely to go and use the {park}'. […] On reflection of that, actually, that project is a brilliant example of the possibilities of digital engagement. However, I think its success was largely based on the initial physical engagements, actually being in person in meetings. […]

Consultancy

5.4.3 Lack of data

The previous sections have explored how different factors can increase or decrease the accessibility and inclusivity of engagement processes, including specific concerns for digital engagement (one key message being that digital inclusions and exclusions cannot be considered out of the wider context and socio-economic dynamics). However, while the interviewees provided detailed descriptions of perceived benefits and risks of engaging online, they did not necessarily have access to data which supported this – e.g., robust information on who was attending engagement sessions and how representative this was of the communities they were engaging with. Many reflected that these comments on inclusion and representativeness were anecdotal, estimations/guesswork, or reflective. The vast majority of interview participants were ambiguous about the demographic information of participants, did not know whether or not they collected it, and/or highlighted it as an area which needed to be improved in the future.

This section briefly includes some quotes from interviewees who reflected on a lack (or absence) of information about their engagement with participants, highlighting a gap in knowledge to be improved in the future (5 out of 34 interviewees contributed to this theme[49]). This links with a section later in this chapter which explores interviewees' perceived gaps and limitations regarding feedback and evaluation of engagement processes (e.g., capturing participants' views on the engagement process and how successful and/or impactful it was), particularly when engaging online (section 5.10).

For example, PR14 (below) reflected that they did not have time to collect demographic data about participants (which could provide them with an indication of how accessible and inclusive their engagement process was) due to project time constraints. As a result, much of the information they have about the audiences they were reaching is 'guesswork'.

PR14: In terms of formal thinking about it {accessibility and inclusion}, not really... It's more, because of the time scales, we didn't have much time for this. […] But in terms of any formal thinking about it, no, just due to timescales - we didn't have time to think these things through beforehand. […] So, it's something that needs to be thought out more.

[…] Not many of our projects have permission to collect that sort of {demographic} data. Hopefully, some of our projects that are in development will have some of that provision, because I think there's a lot more emphasis on finding out who the audiences are, and you know, how

[49] Participant ID: PR10, PR13, PR14, PR23, PR28

we can see where the gaps are, and how we can kind of make things more engaging for people who we're not getting to as much. But yeah, at the moment we don't have information on who our audiences are, so it's a lot of guesswork, really.

Museum

Similarly, PR05 explained that they felt that there was a divide between engaging older and younger age groups via digital and remote means, however they acknowledged that this was a 'vast generalisation' and it was based on 'anecdotal' evidence and was based on their personal observations and reflections.

PR05: And I think what I've been surprised by is how much better the senior stakeholders have taken to this. And this is a vast generalisation, but I think there's a lot of local authority officers who like going to meetings and seeing that same friends and discussing the projects that they're working on. And the online format forces things to be a bit more efficient and effective, which really works for, you know, senior stakeholders who hate going to meetings, because they spend 65 or 70% of their time in them, and suddenly, these meetings are quicker, more efficient, more snappy, you get more done, you move on to the next one, and you don't have to travel. And so, I think that maybe this is anecdotal, it's just my observation, but I wonder if there's a divide between more junior people not buying into the online stuff as much as more senior people. It seems to have pivoted it better, I feel, but that's anecdotal.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR14 (below) felt that moving to online and remote methods helped to increase the reach and inclusivity of engagement. However, they reflect that they did not measure or evaluate how much their reach increased. This is partly because many of the participants did not have formal and/or consistent methods of feedback, evaluation, and measuring 'success' for engagement.

PR14: So yeah, although we didn't do the physical events, we still got good engagement. And it's made us think that we can maybe increase our reach. Although we can't really measure it, I think we might have engaged people who normally couldn't come along to the in-person events. So, we'd like to think that it was more inclusive, but we have no way of measuring it. We have data on the numbers, but not who they were... Maybe in future years, we could try that.

Museum

In another situation, PR23 (below) highlighted a lack of robust evidence about which groups of people were engaging with their projects, particularly during the pandemic when they wanted to maximise levels of participation (so reduced the tasks that participants had to complete when engaging, for example filling out demographic information). They highlight this as an area which needed to be improved in the future.

PR23: What we don't have, and what we need to get soon, is more definitive evidence about that we are actually hitting all the groups that we need to hit. Because right at the beginning of Coronavirus, we just were so anxious to get any kind of feedback, that we've made it as easy as we could to participate. So now we're going to have to start going back and try and do more, so if we have this conversation in a year then we'll have done a lot more by way of analysis.

Consultancy

PR13 (below) had collected some demographic information about participants at the start of their engagement process. However, they had found that participants were less likely to fill out their personal details online, than in-person (i.e., on paper). Linking to sections later in this chapter, other interviewees (see section 5.10) explained that asking participants to fill out demographic information or feedback forms could increase incidences of 'drop-outs' from the engagement process, for example due to digital fatigue (see section 5.9.2).

PR13: We do collect a few questions at the start, you don't have to ask them, but questions capturing rough age category, ethnicity, gender... Then we can break data down into these categories, we do try and capture that. So we have thought about it, comparing responses to our online questionnaire, to face to face events... But we found that online people are less likely to put in their personal details than on paper, which is interesting. So yeah, it came down to the percentage of people who were engaging online being less than the percentage of people who engaged in person, so more people came to the in-person engagement event, so you have to take this with a pinch of salt - is it actually a trend, people not entering their personal details online, or did they just not see or skip past this page? So there's quite a few factors that we don't quite understand. But it was interesting to see.

Council

This section has explored the various digital inclusions and exclusions associated with engagement processes, which are rooted in fundamental societal inequalities. The next section considers the digital skills that are needed for engagement and how a lack of skills and/or confidence can exclude people.

5.5 Digital literacy

This theme is about the skills which are needed for digital engagement, which can include or exclude people based on their level of digital literacy and (lack of) confidence (see Box 10 for a summary). This section also includes information about the digital skills which can be gained through engagement and how this can be achieved. 15 out of 34 interviewees spoke about digital skills and levels of confidence engaging in online environments, in terms of their perceptions of both participants' experience and those conducting the engagement process[50]. Many of these interviewees spoke about the need for digital upskilling during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting important digital skills and ways to improve them. This section is highly interlinked with the previous section about access and inclusion and section 6.3 in Chapter 6.

Box 10. Summary of key findings: Digital literacy

This theme is about the skills which are needed for digital engagement (digital literacy). People can be excluded due to a lack of digital skills and lack of confidence using them. This also considers how opportunities can be maximised for both participants and engagers to develop their digital literacy and confidence during the engagement process.

- Whilst some people learned new digital skills during the pandemic, lack of digital skills risked excluding new groups as engagement opportunities moved online.
- The assumption cannot be made that all participants and actors in the engagement process have the same level of skills and abilities to give them the equal opportunity to engage online.
- Both participants and engagers may be provided with the opportunity to develop digital skills and confidence through digital engagement. For example, though learning how to use new tools and providing stakeholders with training to develop digital skills.
    - Training can provide an opportunity to build relationships with stakeholders, for example, by having 'trial runs' of technology.
- Digital skills competency was linked to both participants' and engagers' confidence taking part in/conducting stakeholder engagement online. It is important to consider what is within people's comfort zones and the impact of this on their capacity and capability to engage.

[50] Participant ID: PR01, PR02, PR03, PR06, PR06, PR08, PR10, PR11, PR13, PR17, PR18, PR19, PR22, PR29, PR30, PR34

5.5.1 Skills, training, and confidence

Building on and linking to the previous section about access and inclusion in digital engagement (and how this links to more fundamental socio-economic inequalities), several participants spoke about digital literacy gaps, digital exclusions and divides, and the opportunity for upskilling during the pandemic (13 out of 34 interviewees contributed to this theme[51]). For example, PR13 (below) highlighted the importance of capturing the opinions of those who were less 'tech savvy' and may be excluded through online engagement.

PR13:	So, I think we decided quite early on that we'll set up the platform so you can still comment online, but we'll make sure we try and capture everyone's opinions later on when we can have a physical event. It could be that those who are least tech savvy could also be most vulnerable to COVID, so they might not want to come to a big event and travel, so we are going to have to look at this later on - how can we still capture their opinions? It's something that we really need to consider going forward.
	Council

For PR11, a key risk was making assumptions that everyone was technologically literate when in reality, this was not always the case in their stakeholder community. They go on to reflect that these skills are not static and can be transferred between generations and families, depending on the situation.

PR11:	I guess, you know, we make the assumption that everyone is technologically literate, which isn't, […] if you've been farming for 16 years, and that's all you know, and you don't need to know anything beyond the farm gate in terms of tech, you know, as long as you know how a scanner works for your sheep, or whatever, I'm making massive assumptions here... But like, if you put a laptop in front of a farmer, are they gonna know what to do with it? Maybe not. That possibly speaks more widely, […].
	University

PR06 (below) explained that their participants had different levels of geospatial literacy (i.e., the skills for engaging via mapping and other geospatial tools). They reflected that while some participants were highly competent at engaging via these technologies, others were excluded from using these technologies due to skills barriers and preferred to engage in-person.

[51] Participant ID: PR01, PR02, PR03, PR06, PR07, PR10, PR11, PR13, PR17, PR18, PR22, PR29, PR30

PR06: So, for example, we've got some really young arable farmers {stakeholders} that are using GIS {Geographic Information Systems} software already, they love {the software}, they understand how it works. They understand the importance of this geospatial world. But then those smaller, more traditional farmers, that would be really engaged if he went and sat in a kitchen and had a cup of tea, they maybe felt a bit isolated in that situation, because they didn't realise, or they don't fully understand the whole premise of the feedback mechanisms we're using {via digital tools} - the webinars, the podcasts, the PDF documents... […].

Charity/not-for-profit

PR17 (below) explained how digital literacy was linked with access to technical hardware. This can create issues if stakeholders do not have access to the devices run the software, as well as the key skills needed to operate them. PR22 also made this point.

PR17: Yeah, we've definitely had to think about adapting. […] And we've actually come to find out that a lot of the schools don't have lab, every student has a tablet, which, oh, dear Lord, does not really convey computer literacy. And so then we struggle with that. And then once the pandemic came along, and the students are actually at home, pretty much we're told the only thing we can do it on is a mobile device. And you can read the work on a mobile device, it wasn't designed for a mobile device, so that you could read the work. But the key component, which is the students creating their own stories, the software doesn't work on a mobile device, it just isn't designed for that. And there's no alternative, there just isn't one... I searched and searched and searched, and the closest I can get is like, PowerPoint. […]

University

PR22 (below) spoke about the links between digital literacy and professional experience, which was also raised by participants in the previous section (PR03, PR09, PR12) in relation to age, education, and affluence.

PR22: I'm very lucky because all of our parish councillors are very experienced and are what you would call ‘professional people’. And we have an exceptionally efficient parish clerk. And we don't normally have that many people come to our meetings. So, like, we've had one gentleman come and talk to us at the start of the planning meeting. And obviously, you know, it was quite straightforward and how it would happen ordinarily. I have heard about parishes where certainly like, initially, when people weren't using passwords for Zoom, you hear stories of people getting ambushed by a lot of people turning up.

Consultancy

PR10 (below) described how it can be difficult to cater for different levels of digital literacy and experience – there is no guarantee that everyone will be able to engage equally. PR11 also made this point. They reflect on the fact that these processes can rely on people's initiatives to engage and follow-up, highlighting the issue that it is also difficult to assess whether engagement processes were accessible or not (linking with section 4.5.3 and 4.10 on data, feedback, and evaluation gaps).

PR10: Okay, well, in the case of the citizen forum […], it would have been difficult. Probably with careful design you could have done it, but it would have involved more steps and more commitment from participants, because not all of them started at the same level, right. So some may be very well versed with the technology, have used Skype or other things before, and others would have no experience whatsoever**.**

So you have to be quite selective, and you know, trying to be very specific, and hope that the topics or the labels that you use, speak to everybody equally so that they're able to find their home, their niche, their area of interest, quite clearly. But you have to rely on people's initiative, that they follow up conversations and make that contact, and maybe even just call somebody and you know, discuss something on the phone. It's something you can enable and try and make as easy and accessible as possible, but it's no guarantee. And also, I wouldn't know how to be able to pull up and assess for that that's worked or not, you know, I wouldn't be able to tell how many follow-up phone calls there were...

University

Other participants highlighted the opportunities for developing digital literacy through digital engagement. For example, PR01 (below) explained how lockdown provided opportunities to learn new skills and in response to this they had set up an online group to share learning with other groups and organisations. One way that they were able to learn new skills was through engaging with more events and learning new information, including professional best practices, which was more efficient when shared online (e.g., due to saving time and reducing the need to travel).

PR01: We've set up {an online} group and we're trying to get more people to share their learning {about digital engagement}. And I mean, actually lockdown has probably been a real bonus in a way. It's interesting because people have had to suddenly get all of these new skills. I mean, we've been doing webinars and that sort of thing to have discussions. So yeah, it's interesting to see who's adapting, who isn't, and who's being excluded as a result... But also, who's engaged more as a result?

Equally, it's been a great time for learning in terms of digital, but also there's so much information out there, people are also putting more and more on social media... Whether through Twitter, or LinkedIn, or whatever platform people are using, some from a professional standpoint for promoting best practice, that there are a lot of things you can engage with that you probably wouldn't have had the opportunity to engage with before, if you were having to physically go to different events, because you can only fit in so much. So these events are now only an hour of your day, as opposed to what would have been a good half a day that you'd need to take out.

Consultancy

Expanding on the above quote, PR29 (below) reflects that although ‘digital-by-default’ approaches can present barriers to those who are lacking in digital skills on one hand, digital engagement can provide opportunities for people to improve their digital skills on the other. This can not only be an opportunity to develop digital literacy through training (thus helping to overcome digital literacy ‘gaps’ highlighted earlier in this section), but the identification of stakeholders and training in itself can help make people ‘harder to reach’ through developing relationships with them (linking with sections 4.4 and 4.8).

PR29: So often, in this day and age, a lot of people are ‘digital by default’. So that can make it difficult. But also, it can be a great opportunity to help those who are harder to reach, or maybe are lacking in digital skills, by providing an avenue of engaging with them by improving their digital skills. So then they become less harder to reach, because you've got that relationship with them, and you've also provided them with a tangible skill and benefit that could help them […]. And help them just in life generally. So that's what I thought was interesting. […]

PR29: Yeah, so essentially, […] if organisations are digital by default, it's going to be a hindrance because some people don't have the technology, or the wi-fi, or they don't have the computer access, or they don't have the skills in using it because they haven't had it previously. It can increase the likelihood that people are harder to reach because if you're using digital by default, and they don't have it, it asks as that hindrance.

However, if you acknowledge that those people exist, and you know where those people are, who are struggling with either access to digital equipment, or all the skills for using digital equipment, then you can help them build those skills, whether it be centres, or providing them with advice and that type of thing. And from doing that process, you're also developing a relationship with them. So it's like, you're helping them build a skill that was beneficial for them […], and also in your communication with them. And in that process of developing that skill, you develop a relationship with them. [...] {And} then {if there is a} positive relationship with {stakeholders} […] then they're going to be more likely to be engaged with {decision-makers}, which will help in other aspects of policy, and all that type of thing.

University

PR29 (below) then went on to further emphasise the importance of training for improving skills and confidence as well as trusting relationships between stakeholders, describing how this can be achieved in a practical sense. In the situation described below – which is described from the perspective of PR29 having been a participant in the event - having trial runs and 'coffee breaks' in a webinar provided a useful opportunity to check that participants were comfortable and confident using the software, as well as acting as an icebreaker and fostering relationships (also see sections 5.7 and 5.8).

PR29: […] One thing I did find useful, but with the webinar I mentioned earlier with the coffee breaks, they gave us an option the day before to check in and see if we liked the software they were using. So how to login, and share your screen, and that sort of thing - it was so useful and absolutely key, it made it so much easier and more comfortable. And you almost break the ice by doing that. So it was almost like a testing event. […]

The day before {the webinar}, they gave the option to login with the other presenters, to just go over how to share the screen, how the day was gonna be run, what features were available and that sort of thing. It made me […] a lot more comfortable going to the day. And I'd spoken to the guy running it and that put me a little more at ease. So that leads back to what I mentioned before about training people, and how much it helps and how it helps build relationships.

University

Several engagers spoke about the perceived and experienced confidence levels of both participants and those carrying out the engagement process, and how this can impact the engagement process – this was frequently referred to as what was within someone's 'comfort zone' (PR03, PR08, PR18, PR19, PR22, PR29, PR30). This links to concerns raised in section 4.6 about what was within engagement facilitator's comfort zones with regards to engaging via digital and remote methods, and section 5.3 in Chapter 6 which explores organisational and institutional challenges and opportunities for building staff members' skills and confidence levels in engaging.

Some engagers were nervous about engaging online for the first time during the pandemic. For example, PR08 (below) talks about both their nervousness using Zoom videoconferencing for the first time, as well as the perceived 'elitism' of those who had a 'head start' regarding their confidence and experience with digital technologies.

PR08: I remember watching a Zoom meeting and I was blown away at how slick it was, and how easy they made it look. Also, I was also quite envious - hang on, I didn't get that training! It gives them a bit of arrogance, elitism... they had a head start. This can then leave people behind. This online stuff can easily leave people behind; a) if you haven't got a broadband connection, b) if you've got no training, c) if you're a bit worried about looking at the camera...

Rural journalist

PR08 (below) then went on to talk about how they generally feel nervous around technology, perceiving it as an invasion of their privacy. When engaging online, is important to consider that different people will have different attitudes and comfort zones. This invasion of personal privacy links with previous comments in this chapter about the blurring of personal and private spaces when engaging online.

PR08: So, I mentioned my camera {webcam} being like a raven, like an eye looking at me. When I'm just doing my normal work, I just push the camera to one side. Otherwise, it's staring at me, and no one likes an eye looking at you. It'd be interesting to write about 'camera traps' and the interference with people going about their business. It's an invasion of privacy.

Yeah, it's like Gogglebox, but you don't know when it's switched on and collecting data. It doesn't affect me, I'm not too concerned, I'm not a very private person, I'm in the public domain... But I do think about it, obviously.

Rural journalist

PR30 (below) described a nervousness sharing screens via Zoom videoconferencing and the importance of training to build confidence as well as the need for 'backups' in case of technical errors.

PR30: And that's us learning Zoom, as well. You know, there's a nervousness around allowing people to share their screens because there... I personally would trust most people to not suddenly share their screen, but you need to have those backups in place so that another member of staff could take over if someone had an internet issue. And I think it was us trying to use Zoom, and all the intricacies, like the breakout rooms. I was on a session where they used them and it was really good, but it's about training and people getting confident.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR08 reflected (below) that training did help to reduce their apprehensions engaging online, highlighting the importance of not assuming that everyone is equally comfortable using technology (and providing targeted training). PR08 is optimistic about training and learning new digital skills, commenting that they don't want to be 'behind on the curve' in an increasingly digitised world. This links several of the themes discussed in the previous sections, highlighting several benefits which can be achieved through training: it can help to reduce the likelihood of technical errors, develop key digital skills, reach 'harder to reach' stakeholders and foster trusting relationships, and help to build people's comfort and confidence using digital technologies.

PR08: I just remembered, I did do a Zoom call […] And it was good, so I gained a bit of confidence. But definitely, there's a little bit of the tech side of me saying 'oh, how do I launch my own one?'. I hadn't got the training; I wasn't going to start making an ass of myself... To advertise an online discussion and then not actually be able to launch it, would be a right screw up. Yeah, so I wasn't being very brave there. […]

PR08: But you've reminded me, I think it's worth paying someone to come and give me training at this stage, because I can see the direction of travel - it's online, and people are moving fast on it. And I don't want to be behind on the curve. I would like to, because of the stuff I do, I think it's something that I'm going to have to learn, whether I like it or not, I still believe {in} face to face for my field […]. You know, face to face still has to play a part. […]

But at the same time, I mustn't let this gap of online scare me into not doing it. When I say scare, it's really a kind of a kind of tech thing... You don't want to freeze half way through the meeting because your broadband […] has gone down. I think it's a good idea to get the confidence, test it with your friends, get up to speed with your online.

Rural journalist

This section has explored the digital skills needed to effectively engage online, how people can be excluded from engagement due to a lack of skills and confidence, and how digital skills can be developed through engaging and training. The next section considers how power dynamics can take on new dimensions in digital engagement.

5.6 Power relations

This section is about power relations between different actors that can be involved in the engagement process (e.g., between participants and engagers, between participants and other participants, between engagers and organisations, and so forth), and how they play out differently in online environments. 17 out of 34 interviewees contributed to this theme[52]. Interviewees highlighted fundamental issues with participation and power relations (regardless of the methods used) as well as some specific considerations for digital engagement (e.g., when the use of technology worked to increase or level out power imbalances).

The findings presented in this section are summarised below in **Box 11.**

Box 11. Summary of key findings: Power relations

This theme explores the power relations between various actors in the engagement process (e.g., participants and engagers, between participants and other participants) and how they play out in digital environments.

- Power relations are inherent and systemic to engagement and wider democratic processes. Unequal power relations can impact any engagement process, however, there are some particular considerations for digital.
- On one hand, digital technology can create a more equal platform that reduces power politics between participants, those responsible for engaging, and other actors.
    - The functions and visual qualities of digital engagement tools and platforms can create an environment where people speak more freely.
    - Digital spaces can give so-called 'harder to reach' stakeholders and 'quieter voices' the opportunity to contribute to discussions.
- On the other hand, digital engagement can still be dominated by unequal power dynamics that can prevent people from fully participating. Some engagers felt that it was more difficult to manage power imbalances online, compared to in-person.
- The accelerated use of digital tools during the pandemic has placed a spotlight on the importance of skilled chairs and facilitators for effective engagement. For example, some engagers reflected that online engagement required a different set of skills for facilitation to in-person. Ultimately, engagers highlighted the inherent importance of professional facilitators for managing power imbalances in all (digital, remote, or in-person) engagement processes.

[52] Participant ID: PR02, PR04, PR05, PR06, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR16, PR17, PR19, PR20, PR23, PR28, PR29, PR30, PR31, PR33, PR34

5.6.1 Managing power imbalances

Several participants (3 out of 34 interviewees[53]) thought that digital technology could work to level out power relations, giving participants more equal opportunity to contribute to discussions compared to in-person engagement. For example, PR05 (below) describes how technology can create a more 'equal platform' that reduces the 'power politics' between participants (e.g., between different members of staff), for example giving some people more confidence to speak up. Here, options like the 'raise hand' function in Zoom can help prevent people from interrupting one another, facilitating the flow of conversation (discussed in more detail in section 5.7) and giving quieter voices more chance to contribute. Through their ability to control the conversation more tightly (including who contributes, and when), PR05 reflects that digital platform and their functions can give the chair 'more power, but also […] more responsibility'.

PR05:	But yeah, {digital technology} creates a more equal platform, so therefore, you can find that a project officer might be answering the same question that the Director […] has just answered. Whereas that project officer probably may not have had the confidence to speak up if he was saying in front of the Director […]. I think there's less power politics and play if it's well chaired.
PR05:	[…] So, I think I prefer, although it feels a little bit contrived, there's a raise hand function on Zoom. And it makes for a less free flowing conversation but is vital when there's a lot of different people on the call to use that. So if the chair is clear at the start and says, we're going to use our 'raise hands' function in this meeting, so don't just start talking, I will bring people in as those hands appear. So you press the little yellow hand button, I don't know if you've seen that function, and so that way, people don't cut cross across each other, and then you don't have the, you know, biggest, bolshiest, most confident voice caught hogging the conversation, because the chair can actually decide not to bring that person in, if they've already spoken quite a lot to bring in somebody who hasn't spoken yet. And so it gives the chair more power, but it also gives the chair more responsibility.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR05 (below) went on to reflect that they feel more confident chairing a meeting via an online platform than in-person (linking with section 5.5.1).

[53] Participant ID: PR04, PR05, PR06

PR05: […] Yeah, so I guess, to go back a little, I wouldn't say that I'm an expert {at chairing/facilitating webinars}. Although I'm kind of, I'm getting better at it. Personally, I feel more confident chairing on Zoom than I did in a room, again, that's the personal confidence type thing, and I also feel more confident presenting on Zoom than I did beforehand. So maybe, maybe that's just me, maybe it's not, but I'll give you that for what it's worth.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR34 (below) reflected that digital (remote) engagement can help to balance unproductive power relations in the engagement process and introduces a different element of equity online (e.g., between louder and quieter voices).

PR33: And also think one of the things […] about {digital engagement is} the fact that it can take out some of those unproductive power relationships. So if someone's a really good speaker, and quite a powerful speaker, and has a powerful presence, they can really use that to influence a room. And so there's an element of equity online because you lose that. And there's a real level playing field in that way. I mean, but that level playing field is not {equal in terms of} you know, if you haven't got access to the internet, or if it's not accessible to you. So that level playing field changes, you know, sometimes it's better, {and} sometimes it isn't. […]

Software company

Adding more detail to the above quotes, PR04 (below) explained that they think digital technology can be a 'leveller' of power relations. This is partly because everyone is 'visually' on the same level and cannot split up into social groups as easily as in-person. Like PR05, they felt that this can create an environment where more senior and junior members of staff can talk to one another more freely, which links to some of the themes around agency and power relations discussed in Chapter 6 (e.g., section 6.5).

PR04: I think, this is only my view, it's not anything anyone else has articulated, but that is that in most social or committee-based community groups, there are cliques, that often that's quite good. But you tend to find those people who are in positions of greater power may tend to talk to each other in little groups, like the senior staff of organisations may not talk to the junior staff as much. When you're online and there's 30 little pictures on the screen, the first thing is, none of them are any different than anyone else because they're not kind of visually or physically grouping themselves in a particular way.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR04 (below) went on to describe another benefit of digital technology for being a 'leveller' of power relations – the ability to see everyone's names and faces simultaneously on-screen. From their perspective, digital environments are better at balancing power relations and giving participants a more equal chance to contribute (compared to in-person equivalents), while reflecting that the key to the success of any meeting is a skilled chair.

PR04: The second thing that's brilliant, particularly for the likes of me, is […] the screen has got everyone's name, which is brilliant, so you know who everyone is. And I found in some of the larger groups I've been in […] I can never remember who they are, so I just take a screenshot of the Zoom meeting. And I've got two screens here, and on the screen above me, I'll have a screenshot of their names, I know where everyone is. So it's a great leveller being on the screen, relative to the kind of interpersonal politics that some people indulge in interpersonally, to say.

[…] There are a few silly side effects […] But on balance, I think they're efficient. If you've got a good chair, then I think they can be efficient, effective, and good levellers. And I don't think people are unable to talk when they want to, particularly when you use those emojis, where you put your hand up or whatever, and you've got a chair who's watching for that, I think they can be very effective. So yes. […] I find it more like more of a leveller, to be online than to be face-to-face.

Charity/not-for-profit

Although PR06 (below) felt that particular technologies can help give quieter voices the confidence to speak up (they mention polling software as a useful tool for this), it does not completely solve the problem of inequal power relations that are inherent to any participatory process (whether online or offline). They also highlight issues with not being able to read people's body language and social cues in online environments, which is explored in more detail in section 5.7.

PR06: […] The fact that some people will always be louder than others is something you will never be able to escape regardless how you host things. But that's what I think technologies such as {polling software}, which is anonymized and you can type as many answers as you want, gives everyone a chance to be as loud as everyone else. Even if they are introverted, nervous, shy […] they know it's anonymized and they can just say that point, and then the host (e.g., me) can say 'Oh, that was a good point, does anyone want to bring that up?'. Then you can direct the conversation to the topic, rather than the person who said that topic. […] A quiet person might not interject in this conversation, but at least then that topic of conversation is being directed in a way that allows the quieter people to have a say, almost.

PR06: […] However, {when engaging online} unless the speaker, or the host, specifically goes […] 'do you have any comments on that?' […], you might miss out on people having a chance to say something, […] is really hard to read body language, it's really hard to get social cues […] So, I think technology can help, but I don't think it completely solves that some people will shout louder than others.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR17 (below) reflects that although digital technology can enable more people to contribute during the engagement process, it completely depends on the person running the meeting. Digital engagement can still be dominated by 'poor dynamics' which can prevent people from fully participating, compared to in-person.

PR17: I think, like any other any tool, whether it's a room {in-person}, or, you know, a Zoom meeting, I think just that depends on the people running the meeting. I have seen somewhere, definitely, there's more opportunity for people to speak up, especially if you start using the chat function, where people who feel bit overwhelmed in the voice chat, can type a comment or type a question and if you have somebody monitoring that they can keep going back to that. So, I think in that way, it is more inclusive […].

But I've also been in meetings where […] the dynamic of that particular department is so top down and top heavy […]. So, it can come down to the people running the meeting, and you know, how much they like to hear themselves talk. I think anything can still be dominated by some poor dynamics.

University

PR31 (below) explained how, as a facilitator, they would navigate unequal power relations during an online engagement process in the same way as they would any (digital or in-person) engagement process – by identifying potentially problematic groups and power dynamics, then adapting the engagement process accordingly to manage this. One way that this can be done online is by assigning smaller groups to discuss particular issues, while mindfully and carefully facilitating conversations between groups and individuals who may have problematic relationships (e.g., by assigning them to different groups).

PR31: I think, yes, there are some challenges with {digital engagement}, but in a sense, as with face to face {engagement}, I would normally have done my homework in advance. So, I noticed there are likely to be some strong power dynamics […] And I then manage accordingly […]. But with stakeholder workshops, again, if I think there are people who will be particularly problematic, or different groups who are unlikely to be able to get on well with each other, then in Zoom you can pre-assign people to breakout rooms. And you can decide that we're going to have the farmers in one room, and the conservationists in a different room, or we decide on purpose to mix them […]. And when I discovered someone problematic, or a particular {power} dynamic in the room, I'll think, without saying it {out loud}, that I should keep the 'moaners and complainers' in the main room with me, for example.

University

As this section has explored, power relations are fundamental to engagement processes and enabling everyone to participate relies on a skilled chair or facilitator, regardless of whether the meeting is held online or in-person. PR05 (below) reflects on this, highlighting the difference between the chairing skills needed for smaller and larger online meetings.

PR05: And if somebody's really new to a role, and, you know, maybe doesn't have so much experience, I wouldn't be giving them tips on chairing a large Zoom meeting well, I'd be advising them to get a good chair, to do that large Zoom meeting, and for them to practice doing smaller Zoom meetings. Because if it's not chaired well, those people won't come back to the next one. Because it would have just been a conversation between the two loudest voices in the room […] If it's a big meeting, you need someone who's confident and experienced to do it. Otherwise, it won't work, and you will lose engagement in the longer term. […] And maybe that doesn't differentiate between online and in person, maybe the same applies, but anyway.

Charity/not-for-profit

During the interviews, a number of engagers also highlighted the importance of using skilled facilitators to manage power relations became more apparent (PR01, PR04, PR05, PR06, PR07, PR11, PR15, PR16, PR17, PR18, PR20, PR24). For some interviewees, online engagement created new challenges and opportunities for facilitating power dynamics. For example, engagers explained that the role of the chair and/or facilitator of online engagement can change in comparison to in-person events, which can sometimes involve engagers having to step outside of their 'usual' (pre-pandemic) comfort zones, and/or investing in the development of new skills for facilitating digital engagement. For example, PR15 (below) indicated that while the pandemic had accelerated digital innovation and the sharing of ideas (section 4.2), this relied on facilitators.

PR15: The only caveat to that {accelerated creativity and innovation for digital engagement} is that you still need a catalyst, or someone who's leading that, so it's now possible to have far faster communication that's much more effective that leads to positive outcomes. But you still need catalysts, or facilitators, or leaders to ensure that those conversations happen because they don't happen by themselves.

Software company

For PR24, engaging online was not within their natural comfort zone and skillset as a facilitator, which created several problems for them (linking to 5.5 on skills, as well as sections 5.7 and 5.8 on dialogue and rapport). From their perspective, they were highly skilled at facilitating in-person engagement events but lacked the skills (and therefore confidence) to facilitate using digital and remote methods, which resulted in them having to reconsider their skills and 'reinvent' themselves as a professional facilitator. It is important to think about people's 'style' and experience of chairing and facilitating engagement events and it cannot be assumed that everyone has the same skillset and confidence in engaging (linking with many of the organisational challenges explored in Chapter 6, section 6.3).

PR24: I do quite a lot of stakeholder workshops. And it is giving me problems, basically, being locked down, or whatever we are. I've been in this game for a very long time and I'm having to rethink everything that was just my natural talent, if you like, of facilitating and engaging with people... You know, post-it notes, coloured pens […] I actually had a facilitation box, and now it's like, how do I do this without actually meeting with anybody {in-person}? Or, you know, making a rapport with them, or being able to take the temperature of the room, or see what the dynamic is... It's really difficult, and I don't have the answers, I'm learning by doing. And I've done a few mess ups as well, actually. I've had to really reinvent what I do.

University

PR20 (below) summarised that the pandemic had accelerated learnings around what is possible for digital engagement, including the development of new skills for digital facilitation including empathy, listening, and other communication skills (linking to section 5.5 and section 6.3 in Chapter 6).

PR20: So I yeah, I think it {engagement} requires good facilitation in order to be as inclusive as possible. And also, there's a... a cultural learning about it, which I think is really rapidly happening, given the pandemic. So, I know the way that people are doing consultations, where people are working, it's accelerated years and years and years, over just a few weeks, in terms of what people thought was possible, and what isn't. […]

But I think the biggest thing I'd love to see come out of this […] is the skills that people need for the future. You know, to create the society that we want. So things like empathy, the ability to think beyond the immediate job or sector, to understand other people […]. Having that kind of broader understanding and empathy. And listening skills. And then I think a major one is digital communication skills. And so, I would be fascinated in seeing what the reaction is of what happens […] So there might be some hybrid there, there might be some hybrid in the workplace. And even socially.

PR20: But yeah, I think there needs to be some kind of […] recommendations, of digital skills and education, basically helping demographics to engage digitally, because I think this will be the sort of skills that, you know like presentation skills, you can contribute and engage in much richer ways. And I think that comes back to […] power structures and how to engage.

Consultancy

This section has considered that while power dynamics can take on new dimensions in digital environments (e.g., creating a more or less equal platform for discussion), there are always going to be power inequalities in engagement processes. Interviewees recognised this and emphasised the essential role of skilled facilitators for managing power imbalances. The next section explores how important aspects of social interaction and connection can be constrained in digital and remote environments.

5.7 Social interaction and connection

Good quality social interaction is important for all engagement processes. This section explores how digital and remote engagement can place restrictions on the social contextual cues, interaction, and emotional connection that is available in in-person situations. To provide examples of this, the interviewees reflected on many of the values of in-person engagement in terms of what they were missing when switching to digital and remote methods. Almost all of the interviewees raised these issues (32 out of 24 interviewees[54]).

The findings presented in this section are summarised in **Box 12** below.

Box 12. Summary of key findings: Social interaction and knowledge production

This theme is about the fundamental value of good quality social interaction during the engagement process and how this takes on new dimensions in digital environments, compared to in-person.

- Good quality social interaction is essential for effective and meaningful engagement, which was a prominent point that was raised when exploring the challenges and opportunities for digital engagement.
- Digital technology can present both opportunities and constraints relating to the following key points:
    - Digital engagement was perceived to be crude and lacking in-depth quality and nuance. In comparison, digital was perceived as more effective at capturing structured information about a specific topic.
    - Engagers described how digital engagement can restrict opportunities for informal and spontaneous conversations, which were essential for building relationships and capturing in-depth information.
    - Important subtleties including body language, facial expressions, and other non-verbal cues were constrained by digital engagement. This created difficulties ‘reading the room’ and building trust and rapport.
    - Digital tools can reduce the effectiveness of engagement for capturing and integrating local issues and place-based knowledges, particularly in the absence of in-person site visits, ‘walking and talking’ methods.
    - Building on the previous issues, some practitioners reported that they experienced difficulties conducting collaborative, co-produced, and/or bottom-up engagement via digital and remote techniques.

[54] Participant ID: PR01, PR03, PR04, PR05, PR06, PR07, PR08, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR15, PR16, PR17, PR18, PR19, PR20, PR21, PR22, PR23, PR24, PR25, PR26, PR27, PR28, PR29, PR30, PR31, PR33, PR34

5.7.1 In-depth discussion

This section sets the scene by exploring why high-quality social interaction was important for engagement in the first place. This focuses on changes experienced during the pandemic and engagers' perspectives of the impacts of moving in-person engagement to digital and remote methods (most practitioners spoke about this: PR01, PR03, PR04, PR05, PR06, PR07, PR08, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR15, PR16, PR17, PR18, PR19, PR20, PR21, PR22, PR23, PR24, PR25, PR26, PR27, PR28, PR29, PR30, PR31, PR33). For example, PR01 reflected that moving in-person engagement online had resulted in 'subtle changes' regarding social interactions between participants and other actors in the engagement process.

PR01: There have been subtle changes and everything, so and it's important that those social interactions happen. So, people can take note of those changes and see them working. […] We are social creatures... It's those conversations that you don't get that you'd usually get in an office, over a cup of tea, the social interactions... you know, and it's interacting with different people, at different levels, on different days that actually make things more interesting. […]

Consultancy

For PR23, social interaction through digital engagement was more 'crude' compared to in-person. They felt that digital engagement was lacking in terms of quality (e.g., the quality of conversation in terms of detail and/or nuances), which was particularly important for understanding people's concerns and managing potential conflicts (linking with section 6.4 in Chapter 6). Other engagers echoed these concerns by reflecting on the limitations of digital engagement for capturing in-depth dialogue and building emotional connections with participants, with several describing digital engagement as 'not the same', 'completely simplified', less 'meaningful', lacking 'actual dialogue or genuine engagement', and/or less 'authentic' as engaging in-person (PR07, PR10, PR21, PR24). These issues are explored in more depth in the following sections.

PR23: So, I just find it's crude, the digital stuff is crude, which is why we started doing these {in-person} focus groups, because now we have to go out and talk to some of the new residents. And we have to make a real effort to engage with the older residents, because they're pissed off because they're being moved out, and all their moves have been put on hold during Coronavirus... So, loads have been waiting for months for {things} that they were promised at the beginning of the outbreak. […]

I think the irony is what we're getting more people engaged on paper. But […] we were really missing the quality of conversation that could be had.

You know, what are the base of people's concerns, really. And that varies a lot. […] So, I suppose you lose the ability to really tease out what the underlying issues are, and we're addressing that through these focus groups. So, I suppose that's what we lost early on. […]

Consultancy

A number of engagers felt that digital and remote engagement was less effective at capturing in-depth qualitative information compared to in-person methods (PR01, PR07, PR09, PR11, PR13, PR22, PR23, PR27, PR28). For example, PR07 (below) explained that some digital tools (e.g., online surveys), and their accelerated use during the pandemic, was concerning because it could limit the collection of qualitative data, which could in turn impact the quality of the information used to inform the decision-making process.

PR07: So, I mean, one of the things that does concern me is that […] we've suddenly got an influx of lots more surveys {during the pandemic}, and online surveys. And I think there's a real danger that you collect a certain kind of information, but it isn't necessarily actually answering your questions. And so, I think a lot of people are seeing that, 'oh I can just send out an online survey, and ask these questions, and the answers come back, and then I'll have everything' but, you know, you get a very specific kind of information from an online survey, and it's not necessarily going to explain things that much.

And so yeah, that, that does worry me a bit, that we're going to kind of lose maybe more of a qualitative side of a lot of research, because it is harder to do virtually. And there, there are certain methods that you really will struggle to do virtually […].

University

PR09 (below) felt that online methods were more effective for collecting quantitative data, whereas face-to-face approaches were more effective at capturing qualitative information. They reflect that this depends on the nature of the project and advocate for more flexible and mixed-methods approaches which include a 'balance' of online and offline approaches (this is explored in more detail in 5.11).

PR07: It's an interesting question, isn't it because online definitely lends itself more to quantitative approaches, which are much more easily collated that way, and are quick to administer, think of like a typical Survey Monkey type thing. And whereas, you know, that the data that you're collecting from that is useful in a sense, and it really does depend obviously on the nature of your research questions, and having that face to face, or the ability to have a little bit more time and go into more depth and explore quantitative approaches, gives you that kind of depth and colour to what you're trying to explore. And so I think, again, there's a sort of balance there to be had, isn't there. And, I mean, I've always advocated for mixed methods approaches, which I think help to give a broad sense and then give you the steer as to where to go deeper in your in your data.

Non-departmental public body

However, while the debates around qualitative and quantitative methods and digital/in-person approaches were more prominent to some participants during the pandemic, they are not new problems and are fundamental to all types of engagement. PR24 (below) summarises the qualitative/quantitative debate and importance of capturing both types of information for both breadth and depth.

PR22: I haven't, really. I haven't used {digital engagement platform} before but I am quite aware of it, we were literally about to launch it. I mean, I think it's an interesting one. I suppose there's always that kind of thing with consultation, I feel it's that generic feedback. I suppose it's that kind of quantitative/qualitative data debate because I suppose it's very useful when you've got a specific element of a scheme - you know, how happy are you with this on a scale of 1-10? And that gives you some really useful feedback. I think sometimes what's challenging is when we talk about 'what are your aspirations for the area?', 'what bits do you like or not like', and I think it can be difficult to find a tangible way forward from that. And I think that it's sometimes the challenge with very high-level local plan consultation, because you're asking people about these big concepts...

Consultancy

The following sections explore a range of issues related to the impact of digital (remote) engagement on social interaction and knowledge production.

5.7.2 Informality and spontaneity

Engagers described how digital engagement can restrict opportunities for informal and spontaneous social interaction and conversations (16 out of 34 interviewees raised this issue[55]). Interviewees referred to this in a variety of ways including 'informal conversations', 'informal chat', 'chit-chat', 'spin-off conversations', 'side conversations', 'in-between spaces', 'unplanned conversations', 'sudden conversations', and so forth. These conversations were

[55] Participant ID: PR03, PR04, PR05, PR06, PR07, PR10, PR11, PR13, PR16, PR17, PR18, PR19, PR21, PR28, PR29, PR30

important for promoting high quality social interaction, eliciting diverse knowledge types and in-depth information, and fostering relationships.

The majority of engagers emphasised the fact that digital engagement sessions tended to be more structured and for a more specific purpose than in-person engagement which could be more unstructured and enable free-flowing conversation. For example, PR19 reflected that there was a ‘slightly increased formality about {digital engagement}’. Other interviewees commented that the efficiency and structure of online engagement (compared to in-person) resulted in a loss of ‘the anecdotal bits of evidence’ (PR22) and less ‘general chitchat’ (PR03). In another situation, PR30 explained that many digital engagement events lacked ‘sudden conversations’ with participants due to the set time limits of many of these sessions (e.g., a scheduled Zoom call), which was problematic because it limited opportunities for participants to ask questions after the formal engagement session ended.

One important element of in-person engagement, which was lost when moving online, was the ability to discussed topics which were off the meeting agenda (e.g., over a cup of tea). As PR04 (below) explained, choosing between digital (remote) and in-person engagement can be considered to be a trade-off between efficiency and free-flowing discussion which can include topics that are ‘off the agenda’. Building on this, PR07 reflected that ‘sometimes you get the most interesting statements once you’ve turned the recording off’ during online engagement.

PR04: The conversations that go on off the agenda {in meetings} are usually more important than the ones that go on it, or as important. […] And {stakeholders will} have a cup of tea […], and they'll come to some arrangement about something off the agenda altogether.

So that kind of informal contact is what is lost with {online engagement}. Electronic communication tends to be only for a specific purpose, rather than for a general chat. So, it's quite directed, and the periphery of that tends to get lost. […] I think what's interesting is how we will come out of this in terms of the decisions we make. {For example} I had my first face to face meeting {recently} since {the start of lockdown} […] it was windy and cold, it took 20 minutes to get there, 20 minutes to get back, it wasn't at all as effective as a Zoom meeting would be. But it was nice to see people. So, I've got a clear idea of what the trade-offs are. […]

Charity/not-for-profit

PR05 (below) brought together many of these issues – reflecting on the importance of ‘side conversations’ and how these can be lost (or limited) in online situations. They reflect that the key information that is lost is hard to quantify because it is difficult to know exactly what sort of information is being missed out on (however it is clear that something will be lacking). Engagers stated a range of benefits for having informal conversations during the engagement process including to discuss topics in more detail, to expand on or clarify points, to build participants' confidence to contribute to the discussion, and/or to help break down power relations (e.g., PR21 summarised all of these issues).

PR05: Yeah, probably there's the ability for more nuance {face to face}. I suppose, you know, normal communication is spoken. So you miss some of the inflections that people can only give through body language and eye contact. And similarly, you miss those, you know, I've talked about the efficiency and effectiveness of meetings, and there's also the counter argument to that, that you don't get those side conversations, which are often very fruitful. It's often the in-between space where you go off topic a little bit and you come up with your bright idea, kind of thing. That's potentially being lost at the moment. […]

PR05: And it's really hard to quantify that {loss of informal conversations}. But it's the same for being in an office environment. You know, as a […] manager, I used to work from different people's offices […] {and} you get those side conversations - you get to have a chance meeting […] {by} the coffee machine. And yeah, you don't know what you're missing because it's not something that you were planning to do, but you are definitely missing something by that not happening.

Charity/not-for-profit

Other engagers suggested that informal and spontaneous social interaction was important for building trust and rapport with participants (PR06, PR10, PR11, PR16) (linking to section 4.8). For example, PR06 (below) described the importance of recognising that, as humans, we rely on subliminal non-verbal communication such as body language and facial expressions. PR06 reflected that being able to interact in-person (with improved ability to read social cues) is crucial for building relationships with stakeholders.

PR06: I just think personally, I'm better at reading social cues in person, I think on Zoom and Teams it can be hard, especially if you're hosting and you've got 30 people on the call, and you can't see everyone's faces […]. Whereas I feel like in real life if I see someone, and I'm pretty socially aware, if I see someone agitated, or looking like they want to say something, I'll probably address that and ask, 'Are you okay, do you want to say anything?'. Because as human beings, we have quite a detailed social body language communication that's so subliminal, we don't even realise it, but actually with Zoom and Teams technology you don't get that full experience. […]

PR06: I mean, […] a lot of it is about building relationships. […] For example, when I'm meeting the farmers in a village over a sandwich, we talk about them, we talk about how they are, we don't just talk about what's on the agenda. And it’s that whole engagement process that is lacking. So, understanding what inspires other people, what are other people's interests, you know, those things are definitely missed {when engaging online}.

Charity/not-for-profit

Building on this, other engagers suggested additional benefits of informal conversation that can be constrained when engaging online including opportunities to share interests, promote mutual learning, and promote honest and trustworthy dialogue (PR10) (e.g., linking to section 4.8 in this chapter); the ability to effectively manage expectations and mitigate conflict (PR16) (linking with Chapter 6, section 6.4), and the extent to which engagement processes are accessible and inclusive of a range of voices (PR29) (linking with section 5.4 in this chapter). Some illustrative quotes are included below.

PR10: And, you know, you need to have these chance encounters, you need to have an informal atmosphere where people feel comfortable in sharing […] I mean, one-off social interactions would be the thing that helps them to open up, but it's the continuous interaction, meeting, and getting to know the other {stakeholders}. […] So, it's the trust, the sharing of similar interests, and other similarities.

University

PR16: And really, if we were gonna try and engage those people that are very unengaged, and probably they could be quite hostile towards {the organisation} and government generally, trying to invite them to an online call, probably wouldn't be the way you'd want to do that first engagement. You know, it would vary, it would have to be very informal. And sometimes, these online things can feel incredibly formal, you know, I'm sat here with my headset on like I'm in some kind of call centre. And I think that would be very off putting, like, ‘Oh, god, I'm suddenly in this corporate environment’.

Government department

Finally, although online engagement could result in important aspects of informal and remote conversations being lost and/or constrained, it was possible to mitigate these risks (to an extent). For example, PR17, PR28 and PR29 each described ways that informal environments can be created online, promoting spontaneous social interaction, and mitigating some of the risks that have been discussed throughout this section. For example, PR29 (below) explained how they had sent follow-up emails to ask questions and had been involved in a webinar with break out 'coffee rooms' to encourage informal chat. However, PR29 reflects that these virtual methods may not be able to entirely replicate the value gained from in-person interaction.

PR29:	[…] In one webinar I was involved in, they had specific break slots and a coffee room place. So, they had the main room where people could do the presentations, and then a separate coffee room place, so if people wanted to ask questions further, they could go into that. […] I think these webinars have been great because they do reach more people and makes it easier […] So I don't think we should discount them; I think it's been really great and beneficial. And thinking about how we communicate using them is almost a good way to bring things together. But it can be difficult in terms of that side of things, and chatting, and that sort of thing. […]

University

5.7.3 Non-verbal communication

This section builds on the previous section, providing more detail about what can be missed when engaging in online environments. Interviewees described the value of body language, inflections, and social cues for effective engagement and reflected on the constraints of digital and remote methods for capturing these non-verbal forms of communication (18 out of 34 interviewees contributed to this theme[56]). For example, PR11 summarised the benefits of being able to pick up on non-verbal communication (e.g., hand/facial gestures, eye contact) for both participants and those responsible for carrying out the engagement process. They explain that it is more difficult to notice these subtleties during digital engagement sessions.

PR11:	[…] A face-to-face interaction is very different, and you get a lot of different things from that, as opposed to seeing someone on the screen, and facilitating a group session, over Zoom, Skype, Teams, whatever, again, is very different. Because […] it's difficult to have those […] little conversations or {when} people will make gestures or like, eye contact and stuff like that, that will mean just as much as sometimes what they're saying. And you don't get that {online}, you can't even really have proper eye contact. Because if I look at my camera, like I'm not looking at you, if that makes sense. So I guess it's all those subtle things that maybe you pick up on as you start to do more interviews face to face. […] You miss those more kind of yeah, subtle interactions, I guess.

University

[56] Participant ID: PR01, PR04, PR05, PR06, PR07, PR08, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR13, PR16, PR19, PR20, PR21, PR22, PR23, PR27, PR30

Building on this, other participants explained the link between not being able to read the room and the risk of losing participants' attention during engagement sessions (PR01, PR05, PR11, PR20) (linking with section 5.9). For example, PR16 described how, as a facilitator of engagement sessions, they found it more difficult to 'get the vibe from the room' and see 'how people are feeling' online compared to in-person (linking with section 5.6). In another situation, PR20 explained that 'there's an attention issue {with digital engagement} […] you lose something by not being physically in a room together'.

PR01 (below) raised various issues with online engagement including knowing whether participants were present and engaged, highlighting the importance of having webcams switched on. Several other interviewees also spoke about the value of having webcams turned on for promoting social interaction and discussion, due to the ability to read body language and social cues (PR01, PR05, PR08, PR09, PR11).

PR01: And again, I think they very much vary between people sharing cameras, and not sharing cameras, on these things. And I think when you when you've got events with over 100 people obviously... So yeah, they're kind of interesting in that you sort of have got them all on {cameras}, but you wonder how much people are really engaged because they might just have it on in the background and be doing then their other work as well. And whereas, obviously, if you're at an {in-person} event […] I mean there's always people flicking on their phone, but on the whole they've got people's attention slightly more. […] It is interesting how different organisations are approaching these sorts of networking or workshop webinar type things, in terms of how much interaction you have, and how much you don't have.

Consultancy

For PR05 (below), being able to see people's faces via webcam was beneficial for building relationships and a sense of camaraderie between participants (e.g., linking to section 5.8), while also acknowledging that there are drawbacks such as digital fatigue (linking to section 5.9). PR30 also spoke about the drawbacks of having cameras switched on.

PR05: […] Having said that, I agree completely, that like being able to see people's faces massively helps with relationships and sense of feeling like you are part of something, which is obviously really important for a charity/not-for-profit. But I would just be wary that, you know, particularly for senior people, they've been on calls all day long, and it's, it's exhausting sometimes.

Charity/not-for-profit

Finally, PR01 and PR22 both explained how difficulties capturing participants' attention in large online meetings could create issues for projects where conflict was identified as a risk (also see section 6.4 in Chapter 6). PR01 suggested that not being able to read people's body language and other non-verbal communication could make it easier for people to misinterpret each other, which could in turn lead to an increased likelihood of conflict.

PR01: I think also, if you think of 100 people on the screen, your eyes are going all over the place! You can't engage with anybody, but at the same time you feel like you're engaging with thousands, if you know what I mean. I think it works fine on like, one to one, or a couple of people, and personally I think four or five people in these meetings worked quite well... But then when you're doing project meetings... We are doing a project {and} […] there's a project team of, say, 15 people, and I think it's really hard to get the discussion going, especially when there's a few tensions in the air around the Zoom call, where half the people are on camera and showing their face, half of them aren't, and it's just like... People can get the wrong end of the stick […]. I guess not being physically with somebody and being able to read their body language as well, I'm guessing it's easier to misinterpret things […].

Consultancy

Building on the above quote, PR22 explained that there might be less opportunities for participants to share controversial views during online engagement as they are not physically in the same space as others – '[…] If you read an exhibition board online, {and} if you're not happy about what it says, you haven't got someone to turn around and talk to, you're going to have to articulate it in another way'.

5.7.4 In-situ and place-based conversations

Building on the previous sections, this section includes themes related to the effectiveness of digital (remote) engagement for capturing and integrating local issues and knowledges (15 out of 34 interviewees discussed this[57]). Many interviewees felt that many of the benefits associated with engaging in-person and in-situ (e.g., walking around a site with participants) were constrained in digital and remote environments. For example, in PR28 (below) summarised the importance of in-person (compared to digital and remote) approaches for bringing people together, seeing issues in-situ, and fostering 'natural' conversation in the field.

[57] Participant ID: PR03, PR05, PR06, PR07, PR08, PR10, PR11, PR13, PR14, PR18, PR21, PR22, PR26, PR28, PR29

PR28: I think there's still a great benefit and people getting together and talking, naturally, in the field, and talking through issues... Which you can't necessarily achieve through digital engagement. Although, you know, there's Teams and Zoom now that weren't being used before, so maybe there's other ways to bring people together? But yeah, I do think that, at times, we actually need to be outside and get in the environment and see things for real. Hands-on type stuff.

Non-departmental public body

8 interviewees (PR08, PR10, PR11, PR14, PR18, PR21, PR28, PR29) spoke about the value of physically being in the field, or on a site, when engaging. The value of being physically present included being able to view and understand environmental issues in context, as well as using human senses to have a more embodied and tangible experience. For example, PR08 (below) described how in-person site visits and walking methods can enable better conversations because being outside promotes more free-flowing, unstructured, and spontaneous conversations. PR08 explained that walking methods are discussions held outdoors and walking around a site of interest, where the narrative is framed around the surrounding physical environment. They reflect that this is an effective method for promoting respectful and in-depth dialogue between participants, helping to break down barriers between people and more promote balanced discussion (e.g., linking to other themes in this section).

PR08: So, the walk and talk, I suppose it's using the skills, I've being working with and interacting with people for quite a long time. I've been doing it for a number of years, […] I've always proposed a walk and talk, and I call it a walk and talk, where you frame the narrative, frame the topic, mention all the things that might be touched on, and then say this is going to be a robust, respectful dialogue. So, you draw the people who are up to this. And I've always found it really illuminating, getting a disparate group of people, who may have different values from each other, but they all have that common purpose of wanting to interact and engage, and are ready to argue in a good way. […]

PR08: That’s what I mean. It's also the ‘outdoorness’ and the fact that you can have robust discussions. Outside, people don't feel constrained, they're not sitting down, they're standing up, they feel more comfortable, they can use eye contact... I think this helps people to talk better, they're more engaged. You can also disengage, you can turn away, you can almost create the distraction within your conversation if things are getting too uncomfortable. […]

Rural journalist

Building on the above quotes, PR11 (below) described the benefits of talking about an issue and being able to spontaneously go and physically view it with participants, adding richness and mutual understanding to the conversation.

PR11: So, I think there's definitely more opportunity {for informal conversation when you are in-person}. So, I kind of experienced that when I was working on {a} project, you know, a few people will be like, 'Oh, yeah, okay, let's go see this', or 'Oh, I mentioned that, why don't we go along and have a look at it'. And that's always really nice because, again, it's those conversations kind of outside the formal interview that just sometimes give more context or, you know, someone might say something interesting like, "I shouldn't really be taking note of this, but what you've just told me is kind of quite important. And, you know, if I can get that in somewhere, without maybe, you know, making it too obvious, then that's good.

University

Several engagers (6 interviewees[58]) emphasised some key elements of outdoor (in-person) engagement which they felt could not be replicated as effectively online. For PR11 (below), the opportunity to conduct site visits and 'walk and talk' with participants was essential for understanding more complex, intangible concepts like place attachment and emotional attachment to place, which would be much more difficult to capture remotely.

PR11: I certainly don't think you can ever recreate the physical elements of speaking to {stakeholders} in the field, touching things, collecting things yourself... People can do this in their own gardens of course, it's pretty early days in our research but I think having an expert there to facilitate, really helps people learn. On the other hand, not everyone can get to a physical event, and think there's still a place for virtual as well.

We are trying to work out, with our partners, a blended approach where people might go out, look for things, then come back, then speak to a scientist online, but in real time. So, then you'd get a bit of a mixture... That approach might be the best of both worlds.

So yeah, there's definitely benefits to the digital. Our audiences have been larger than they ever were before. But I don't think you can ever replace physically going out in the field with someone […].

University

[58] Participant ID: PR03, PR10, PR14, PR11, PR22, PR29

4 interviewees (PR03, PR10, PR22 and PR29) spoke about the importance of physical site visits for integrating lay and professional knowledge (e.g., the exchange of knowledge between 'scientific experts' and 'local experts') into environmental decision-making processes, including the impacts of digital engagement on this. For example, PR29 (below) described how there can be a disconnect between the views of some stakeholders, emphasising the importance of understanding local context for putting the power into the hands of local people.

PR29: […] And also, people having local knowledge was really important. […] I {once} did an interview with this farmer, who was really annoyed by... these biologists, ecologists, etc., who came to advise on his farm, and they say, 'That flower margin isn't in the right place' or 'You need to put these hedges here', because that's what the data says. And the farmer is like 'Hang on a second, I know that the wind is gonna blow here and just knock it all down at some point'. And they don't have a clue about farming, and what it means, and they're only thinking in term of their point of view - ecology or whatever it is - and that really frustrates the farmer and makes them less likely to engage.

From a social science point of view, having the meetings on the farm puts the power back in the farmer's hands. It's not in an office in {a union or government body}... It's not the farmer going in and feeling like they're being interviewed or challenged. Instead, it's the farmer saying 'Hey, you want to see what this looks like? Come to my farm, I'll show you, I'll tell you'. Obviously there needs to be a balance with ecologists or environmental planners, or whatever, knowing what they know, but having the farmer there to show them about it, they can show them things that they might not always see when looking at big data or whatever.

University

In another situation, PR03 (below) highlighted the importance of intermediaries (such as skilled facilitators, linking with section 5.6) for promoting knowledge exchange between local community stakeholders and professional bodies. This is important for bridging a 'disconnect' between stakeholders' views and experiences.

PR03: […] Because the big catch for us, is for {facilitator} to have success in {funding} getting coordinated between different farms and different areas, to gather local information together. And that's what we're hoping for. We need {skilled facilitators} to continue to provide that between the farmers because at the moment, if one farm does something and the other farm doesn't, there's a disconnect in the middle.

I'll give you an example, I'm the footpath warden for the local parish Council. So the footpath crosses a few different paths. What we need is someone like {skilled facilitators} to go to one of the farmers who manage the land that the footpath goes through and say 'Look, there's money available within {a funding scheme} to do this', you know, and that will be a community plus, okay. […]

Local authority

PR16 (below) expands upon several issues discussed in this section, including the importance of in-person site visits and 'walking and talking' methods for gaining an understanding of issues 'on the ground', for developing a more holistic and nuanced understanding of environmental issues, and for building trust with participants (linking with section 3.8).

PR18: […].. If you want to show you're engaging, then you do need to get out and about. So, I think it's been really good, during this time period {of accelerated digital engagement}. I think we'd definitely be much more open to running things {online} like that. I was quite sceptical, before... […] But I do think there's definitely... the idea would be to go out and talk, because it's definitely more like we're engaging and going to them. I think it would help us build a lot more trust. […]

We've done a lot of {stakeholder} engagement work in our team, which you probably heard about. And a huge part of that is going and walking on the {site} and being shown what it is that's going on. […] Going out with them {stakeholders} on an inspection first, and then having a chat with them after, you know, I think it works really well when describing challenges and blockers and things. I think there's a bit of a disconnect, and they're like, 'you don't actually know what it's like on the ground'. But that's what we're desperately trying to understand in most cases. So, walking with them is really important.

Government department

In the quote below, PR21 made an important point (which is true for the rest of this section, and indeed the entire chapter) that while site visits are beneficial for them and their organisation, they cannot speak for the stakeholders. PR21 reflects that in-person site visits take up a large amount of time out of stakeholders' days, for potentially very little tangible benefit or feedback. They summarised the benefits of site visits for their organisation as gaining an increased understanding of issues, promoting more joined-up thinking, and prompting new questions.

PR21: I personally don't know how much of a benefit {stakeholders} feel that the site visits are. It's probably quite a big chunk of their day, and I'm not sure how much they see off the back of it […]. From our point of view, it just makes the work feel more real and more worthwhile. It's not just reports or numbers in a spreadsheet, or just images on a computer screen, it's actually reminding you what it's all about, […] it gives you a real insight. And you come away feeling a lot more informed, you can take on so much. It can also help to draw together different bits of thinking that you may already have, for example I personally found that I've come back from a few {site} visits and it's prompted a whole load of questions, or it got me to have conversations with people like 'Oh, someone prompted this', or.... So yeah, they're very beneficial from that point of view. They're not so much fact finding, but more opportunities for general engagement.

Government department

5.7.5 Collaboration and co-production

This section is about challenges for conducting more deliberative, collaborative, co-produced, co-designed, bottom-up, and/or community-led engagement using remote digital approaches (9 out of 34 interviewees contributed to this theme[59]). This theme links to multiple other themes in this chapter including sections 5.4, 5.6, and 5.8. Many interviewees advocated for a flexible and hybrid approach (see section 5.11). Challenges for carrying out more co-produced and/or co-designed approaches to engagement are also explored in more depth in Chapter 6 with regards to underlying organisational/institutional constraints.

Several engagers reflected on how digital and remote tools constrain important aspects of collaborative and co-produced engagement (PR07, PR09, PR11, PR20). For example, PR20 (below) described how some sectors had experienced difficulties conducting 'real', meaningful collaborative design work via digital methods, reflecting that in-person methods fostered better conversation (e.g., linking with sections 4.7.1, 4.7.2, and 4.7.3). PR20 explained that although digital engagement was very effective in some situations, they did not think it would have been possible without an in-person meeting with participants at the start of the engagement process.

PR20: […] But with some sectors, particularly I think in architecture and some of the design sectors, I think they're finding it difficult to do the real collaborative design work. And so, they much prefer to revert to {working in-person} around a whiteboard, or some big maps, and start sketching and drawing, and putting post it notes and tracing paper, and things like that. So, my view is that it's still possible to do that remotely, but I think the general feeling across the whole project team was that actually, it's a little bit easier (in-person) because anyone can talk at any moment, and you can read the signals in the room, and you don't have to switch on and off mute and try and share screens and things like that. […]

[59] Participant ID: PR07, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR16, PR20, PR21, PR29

PR20: {One of our projects} started off with physical {in-person} meetings, a series of workshops, for co-designing and co-developing a solution to that problem. […] On reflection of that, actually, that project is a brilliant example of the possibilities of digital engagement. However, I think its success was largely based on the initial physical engagements, actually being in person in meetings. […]

Consultancy

For PR07 (below), restrictions on face-to-face engagement made it very difficult to conduct more creative, inventive, and participatory methods – in their words, 'there's not really a chance for {engagement} to be… more community driven'. They reflect that the reliance on digital and remote engagement methods could change the type of information that is being produced and incorporated into decision-making processes.

PR07: It {the pandemic} could mean that doing more inventive and participatory methods becomes really difficult. And yeah, it's a different kind of knowledge that you're producing, then, it's very research driven. Like, as I was saying, it makes co-production very difficult. And if it's research driven, then it's biased, really, because, you know, we have a particular approach, even though varies between researchers, you know, there's a particular approach, we don't necessarily have the lived experience and other people that we're trying to get information from. So, yeah, it is tricky, and if this {pandemic} lasts for a longer time, it will change the kind of information that's being produced.

PR07: […] Yeah, I think it just feels a lot more top down as well. Like it's very much you know, the research is driving it. There's not really a chance for it to be kind of more community driven. Yeah.

University

PR11 (below) also felt that important elements of engagement could be lost when using online methods, having an impact on the extent that collaborative approaches could be carried out. In particular, PR11 highlights that the important elements of co-design – including the opportunity for informal conversations before and after engagement sessions – could be lost through an exclusively digital and remote approach (linking to sections 4.7.1, 4.7.2, 4.7.3, and 4.7.4).

PR11: But I suppose that's something that I hadn't thought about is how they're now engaging with their groups. So, farm advisors, what are they doing, and I think I've read {that} they're doing video chats, certain people are walking around on their phones, like, FaceTime or whatever. But having seen how successful facilitation […] was, in terms of bringing people together, you know, I think it's a real shame that that could potentially have been lost. And that's having a knock-on effect, […] {on projects that} want to co-design everything, […] it's great that they've got the webinars and everything […], but what will this period {the pandemic} mean?

PR11: […] You know, co-design and the collaboration that was taking place in those {stakeholder} groups will have been lost, because those events can't happen, you know? Yes, the main focus is the speaker, you know, they turn up, they talk about what they do, they talk about why what they're doing is important, but it's the interactions both before and after they speak as well, that's just as important as what they're saying, because it's going to have an influence on people's behaviours, and their values, and what they think is good and bad. […]

University

In the quote below, PR20 reflected that it is important to consider whether more 'human' elements of engagement can be replicated online. Although face-to-face engagement is fundamentally important for collaborative and deliberative engagement, it is possible to achieve this through online techniques in some situations. They describe one example where active listening and open dialogue was encouraged via Zoom, using small break out groups, facilitated questions and storytelling.

PR20: Well, there's one or two that I've been involved in which might be tangential but are enabled by digital communication. And that's the whole premise around dialogue, and how to cut down barriers and assumptions and cognitive biases that people hold, which then end up pitting people against each other. And one of those is {centred around} the idea is that to just "be" as a human being, and engage in particular questions and conversations. And they use as typical Zoom meeting with everyone, and a couple of people say some stories or reflections to begin with. And then you go into lots of smaller groups in breakout rooms, and just discuss with maybe strangers, or maybe people you only have ever met online, particular questions. And the idea is to overcome the masks that people maybe, put on for a job interview or, you know, start a business meeting and say, 'Well, this is me and this is my CV, and this is my company'... And it's actually cut through all of that, and instead try and foster and encourage listening and open dialogue.

Consultancy

This section has explored the importance of good quality social interaction for engagement and how this can be constrained in digital environments, compared to in-person. The next section considers the challenges and opportunities for building and maintaining trust and transparency in online engagement.

5.8 Trust and transparency

This section includes interviewees' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for building trust and transparency during digital engagement processes (20 out of interviewees contributed to this theme[60]). The results presented in this section are summarised in Box 13.

5.8.1 Developing stakeholder relationships

Box 13. Summary of key findings: Trust, transparency, and rapport

This section is about the challenges and opportunities for building and maintaining trust and transparency in digital (remote) engagement processes, how this can impact stakeholder relationships and the perceived credibility of the decision and/or decision-making organisation.

- There are a number of potential risk factors for developing trusting stakeholder relationships during digital engagement processes.
    - For example, some stakeholder relationships were difficult to start and maintain online, and in-person engagement was viewed as important for improving negative pre-conceptions that stakeholders may have about organisations and the engagement process.
- There are a number of potential risk factors regarding the use of digital tools and building (and maintaining) the transparency and credibility of decision-making processes and the organisations responsible for making decisions.
    - For example, in-person interaction with stakeholders was important to increase 'buy-in' and the perception of credible information, and there was a perception that information shared online could be biased.
    - On the other hand, digital tools can increase the visibility, transparency, and openness of engagement processes (and the information that decisions are based on).

8 interviewees[61] spoke about the importance of developing trusting stakeholder relationships, describing some particular issues for fostering trust via digital and remote methods. This theme is explored in more depth in Chapter 6 (section 6.4) within the context of organisational barriers. This section also links to, and builds upon, many of the themes discussed in section 5.7. For example, PR19 (below) described the importance of in-person conversations for

[60] Participant ID: PR01, PR03, PR04, PR05, PR06, PR07, PR10, PR12, PR13, PR15, PR16, PR18, PR19, PR21, PR22, PR23, PR24, PR26, PR27, PR29, PR31, PR34
[61] Participant ID: PR01, PR05, PR16, PR18, PR19, PR22, PR24, PR25

building trust with stakeholders to help them feel comfortable sharing information, reflecting that building personal relationships does not translate well to online methods.

PR19: […] If you're one of our […] residents, and you're having trouble, you might be too embarrassed to pick up the phone and ask for help. But if someone's there {in-person} talking to you, then you might be willing to share your issues - you can tease it out of them – 'What's the problem?', 'How can I help?', 'Is there something we can do?'. So, I think the personal relationship stuff, I don't see how that will translate to online, particularly since a lot of those vulnerable people don't have access to this technology anyway.

Housing association

PR05 (below) was concerned about stakeholder perceptions of their organisation during the pandemic, due to the absence of face-to-face meetings (linking with section 6.4 in Chapter 6 which explores managing expectations). They explain that stakeholders might think that the organisation had 'gone quiet', which could impact stakeholder relationships (PR05 reflected that it would be useful to gather feedback about this from participants; see section 4.11).

PR05: […] But I personally am interested to understand, […] do they {engagement participants} think that the {organisation} is less effective at the moment, because we're not able to meet up? […] I wonder if there's a perception, 'Oh, the {organisation} has is gone quiet', because we're not hosting all these {in-person} meetings, which we used to do. I'm really interested to know, obviously, on my side of the fence, I'm interested in the other side of the fence, what they think about that?

[…] I'd be interested to see that to get the general gist of what people are feeling. And then, you know, at some point, we're gonna have to go 'Right, you know, we're back', we need to look at how the {charity/not-for-profit} is gonna operate in the future […]. I think that could be a really useful process, to understand whether other people think that these meetings have been more efficient and effective, and whether other people value the extra time they have from not commuting, or whether that's outweighed by people really missing getting together?

Charity/not-for-profit

Building on the above quote, PR24 (below) explained that it was important to show community participants that you (as an engager) are willing and present to engage in-person. For PR24, communicating complex information about the environment was more effective in-person to increase trust in the source of information, to reduce the likelihood of misinformation, and to establish trust and rapport.

PR24: I've been doing climate change {communication} for a long time […] So, when people are uncertain about information […], so we're getting into the misinformation thing here […], We look to see if we trust the source of information. And the way to establish trust and rapport is to meet people {in-person} and have a conversation with them, and see what they look like, and see what their mannerisms are, and all these things. […]

University

PR21 (below) emphasised the importance of in-person engagement for improving organisational reputation with some stakeholder groups (linking to Chapter 6, section 6.4). Here, PR21 described how some stakeholders can have pre-conceptions of an engaging member of staff based on their association with a government and policy-related organisation (e.g., that they do not understand local issues). In-person engagement was essential for transparency and building trust: it is important for stakeholders to relate to engaging members of staff as a 'human' (linking to themes in section 5.7 about human-to-human contact).

PR21: […] But that's why we're also going to have the face-to-face groups {as well as online engagement}, so there's an opportunity for fronting up and seeing people. I think that physical presence {in-person} is key, just showing that you're not just a bunch of faceless bureaucrats sitting in an office in London. In fact, most of us aren't in London.

[…] I do genuinely think that {stakeholders} find it refreshing for you to turn off and just look normal. Okay, you might not be wearing {the same clothes as stakeholders}, but you're not turning up in a three piece {suit}, carrying a clip board. I think most {stakeholders} know that we're not like that, but at the same time, you can get a little bit of a sense that {the organisation} is over there in London, and I think sometimes they... If you meet them face to face, I think that they appreciate the fact that you've made the effort to get there. But also, you can have a little bit more of the small talk, and it begins to make things a bit more human - they realise there is a human being there. I mean, I've been to things where I've heard corporate lines being given and you can see people's eyes glazing over, but I don't think that can be avoided entirely. But yeah, the engagement element, it does show that you're prepared to actually go and front up, and not just hide behind policy and papers, and within the four walls of the office that you operate out of.

Government department

5.8.2 Transparency and credibility

This section builds on the previous section, exploring interviewees' perspectives on the impact of digital and remote tools on the transparency, accountability, bias, and credibility of the engagement process and the organisations tasked with carrying them out (14 out of 34 interviewees[62]).

PR22 (below) highlighted several key issues with online approaches and emphasised the importance of in-person engagement for more trustworthy and transparent decision-making (linking to section 5.8.1). They state that in-person interaction was important to be shown as a 'believer' in engagement and that you are not paying 'lip service', which should involve being physically present instead of 'hiding behind a screen' online (linking to the themes around how in-person interaction helped to build trust and credibility in section 4.7).

PR22: I also feel like, for some of the residential stuff I've done, when you've got some of the neighbours that are coming, and they want to see the whites of your eyes, and they want to talk to the developer and find out what's going on, and they want to say 'Look, we were told by the estate agent that this was a field, and it was always going to be a field". I say this to everyone, and I'm a great believer in it - you have to be a believer and you have to buy into it, you can't just play lip service to it. […] I guess at the moment, you are kind of fronting up but behind a screen, which is difficult to actually fronting up and standing at a planning committee and talking to people.

Consultancy

PR22 (below) later explained that although digital and remote methods will likely be their primary approach to engagement in the future, in-person has a critical role for being up-front and transparent with public and stakeholder groups.

PR22: I think what I feel is that I see the online side of it as the 'big' bit. Then if you're not happy with it, you can drop in and do something face to face. Rather than having it the other way around and having an in-person consultation, and saying 'Oh, you can also view this online'. I think I see digital and face to face switching places, in that way. But I feel that things like local plan consultations, that still needs to be done in-person, I still very much feel that there needs to be an opportunity for face-to-face discussion. I really don't feel that people should be using online to hide away from local residents, and things like that.

[62] Participant ID: PR03, PR04, PR06, PR07, PR10, PR12, PR12, PR13, PR15, PR22, PR23, PR24, PR26, PR27

Consultancy

Several other engagers described the importance of in-person engagement for being up-front, open, and honest during the engagement process, helping to increase the legitimacy of decisions and enhance the credibility and trust of decision-making staff and/or organisations. For example, PR01 explained that it is 'not […] professional to hide who you are' (PR01), PR13 commented that engagers 'can't really just hide away from the public', and PR21 emphasised the importance of engagers being 'prepared to actually go and front up, not just hide behind policy and papers.'. This also links to themes around transparency, trust, and openness explored throughout Chapter 6 (e.g., sections 6.4 and 6.5 in particular).

Building on the above points, PR12 (below) provided more detail regarding how in-person engagement helps to demonstrate that decision-makers are present, actively listening, and willing to be held accountable. This can help increase the likelihood that participants view the engagement process as 'serious' and 'credible'. PR12 also comment that in-person engagement (section 5.7) is an inherent part of leadership skills (also see Chapter 6, section 6.3).

PR12: […] They {face to face methods} also demonstrate presence, and a commitment to be shouted at. And that's not to be underestimated. You're not hiding behind a digital tool, you're out there, and you're willing to be spoken with, and spoken at. And that's really important. There needs to be a perception of politicians and decision makers being willing to be held to account, even it's being shouted at. And actually, that's really important, because for some people, the online domain is either not visible, or not as serious, as you in person. A lot of people do understand, you know, that it's as serious and as credible because they know it works, but for a lot of people, that's not the case. And there's something about, what used to be called pressing the flesh, which you can't do at the moment, but actually being out there among people. It's part of leadership. And should remain part of leadership.

Consultancy

Other engagers provided examples of situations where digital participatory technologies helped to increase the transparency and credibility of the decision-making process, both in online (remote) situations and when the tools were used in-person with stakeholders (PR06, PR12, PR15, PR26). For example, PR06 (below) described how a participatory mapping tool – when used in-person with stakeholders – helped to improve transparency of decision-making and ground truth information.

PR06: The {environmental decision-making) system at the moment doesn't ever really try and utilise the knowledge that the landowners have of the local area, you know, it's all just controlled from Westminster, and they have to meet these certain prescriptions if they want to receive the money. Whereas if you ask a landowner, 'What do you think the local priorities are? What do you think can change?', […] a lot of them have pretty good ideas – 'It depends on this part of the river because my cattle are in there' or 'I need to do a bit of ditch management along here, but I haven't got around to doing it' or, you know, and I think that's what tools like {digital mapping platform} […] just allows for that transparency.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR26 (below) described how online and remote digital engagement platforms can be designed to help increase the transparency of the decision-making process. One important aspect of this was the ability to easily keep public and stakeholder groups informed throughout the lifecycle of the entire project (e.g., using news feed features, comments, reporting tools, participant feedback, etc.). It is to 'close the loop' by reporting back to participants on how their input was incorporated into decision-making processes and outcomes (linking with section 5.10).

PR26: So {online tools} they aim to help people understand more about the life cycle. And that's a really transparent way to do it, keeping people informed as to where things are at. And you can customise all the stages as well. So they've completely customised the whole thing. […] That's the closing the loop thing, which is so important. […] And then they could put as much information in here as they wanted to […]. So that way it's really transparent. It's saying – 'We took all the data from those pins, we analysed your comments and feedback, and these are the actions we're now going to take as a direct result of your input'. So, it really encourages the transparency, building a lot of trust between any of our clients and who they're consulting with, effectively.

Software company

Building on the above point, PR12 (below) who explained that digital (remote) participatory platforms can help to increase transparency by increasing the public visibility of the data which informs decisions. They explained that this increased transparency via digital tools can help to hold decision-makers accountable because they require public-facing organisations to share information in an accessible manner, commenting that organisations who use these platforms are 'ahead of the curve'.

PR12: So what {our digital engagement platform} does, and you could use any kind of survey, but the level of transparency that {our platform} provides - every one of our websites is on an open URL, so everybody can see what everybody said, and we don't remove them. So once {a project} closes, even when the {software} licence expires, we carry on hosting it indefinitely, because it costs us very little. And we actually believe that you're creating accountability by maintaining very easy visibility of what people have said. So that I think differentiates us from I think probably all the competition. This commitment to long-term transparency.

Software company

For PR23 (below), the increased accessibility and openness of data through online tools and platforms could be an issue as it increased the accountability of organisations, and so could deepen cynicism and public mistrust in decision-making processes and outcomes.

PR23: The other thing it's {digital technology} good for, and I suppose this is my worry about the future, is it makes us much more accountable. Because actually, we can play back to people the sort of comments that other people have made relatively easily. And they can see it, and people being taking the time to see it. And then if they can't see it reflected in our schemes, or how they developed, then I can see that people will become much more cynical about it.

So, I mean, there's also already a degree of cynicism, because we will always have to say to people "'Look the number of homes we're going to build here, plus or minus 10 or 20, is not going to vary very much'. So, you know, we have to be frank about that. But if actually we fail to deliver, you know, […] loads of people say, you know, everyone is replying saying 'We don't think this will work, it's a nightmare parking around here already, and here is the evidence'. But we feel constraints to play back to people what they say, because that's best practice, but I don't know... I wonder if online engagement will deepen existing cynicism, like this.

Consultancy

Although digital technology could help increase the transparency and openness of the information used to inform decision-making processes on one hand, other engagers highlighted the importance of being selectively transparent and protecting certain types of information (PR03, PR04, PR06, PR10, PR12, PR24, PR26, PR28). For example, PR04 (below) explained that it was important to be clear about why some data is not publicly accessible, for example when dealing with confidential information (linking with section 5.9).

PR04: […] Transparency and inclusiveness are actually critical. But there are always times when you need to be confidential with people and I suppose you can be transparent about being confidential, in other words, say to people, 'This is something I'd like to discuss with so and so, not in this {public} forum'. But there will always be sensitivities, particularly when you're dealing with vulnerable people, where you need to have a confidential conversation with people. […].

Charity/not-for-profit

PR06 (below) emphasised the importance of being selectively transparent with stakeholders' data and carefully considering the type of information that should (and should not) be accessible to others, explaining that some stakeholders preferred that specific types of information were not publicly accessible.

PR06: {The} reports we produced were so varied. And they were specific to a farmer, and they were private to that {stakeholder group}, because {our organisation} is there to build trust with those {stakeholders}. So if there was something that could cause the {stakeholder} to have a fine from {an environmental organisation}, so if it's a pollution incidence, we don't go and tell the {organisation} that. […] And that's how {our organisation} builds trust because there's no point going and slapping their wrists […] {and reporting them}, there's no point in that.

PR06: […] Because we're now at this stage, whether it is the technology to help this transparency, but I think selective transparency is key. The {stakeholders} don't want to share everything, you know, there's got to be an element of 'This is what I'm doing to the land but it's only for my own personal business model'. […]

Charity/not-for-profit

Several participants (PR03, PR04, PR10, PR24, PR26) spoke about the interlinked risks associated with bias, misinformation, and credibility. For example, PR03 (below) explained that a potential risk with a participatory mapping tool was that some stakeholders were able to edit information that others had posted.

PR03: We did raise… […] {An} issue we did have was, you know, if we report an issue {via the participatory mapping platform}, who is allowed to edit it? One of our issues is that if we made a report, you know, we wouldn't want someone down the line editing it out because they didn't like what it said. It's not an issue at the moment because it's a trial.

Local authority

For PR04 (below), a key risk was the difficulty of determining the credibility of statements made online, compared to statements made in-person (e.g., linking to section 5.7 which explored links between in-person interactions and trust/credibility). They state that even if information is transparent and recorded online, there's no guaranteed truth in it unless you can back it up with evidence, emphasising the importance of triangulating findings.

PR04: I suppose the thing that is of interest to most people is when you use electronic media, it is increasingly difficult to verify the truth of things. I mean, it might not be fake news. But when everything is done, you know, through {online} chat, through visual, I find it sometimes difficult to know whether people's claims about things are true or not, particularly when they're often anecdotal. And I think at some point, you've got to distil all of that kind of communication into something that is verifiable […] what I mean, is you've got to be able to triangulate some of the claims are made, because increasingly, as we do it electronically, even if it's recorded, there's no necessary truth in any of it unless you can back it up with some kind of evidence. And I think that's, that's the biggest thing to watch.

Charity/not-for-profit

Building on the above point, PR10 (below) spoke about the risk of bias when using some online tools (e.g., the increased risk of participants' being influenced by the opinions of others when this information can be seen by all participants). This could risk over- or under-emphasising some points, creating bias in the information, or showing information from an unrepresentative sample of people.

PR10: {With some online tools} you can see what's already been published, I think it's sort of a real time thing. So of course, those who are a bit late, will be influenced by what they're already reading on the screen. So it's not quite the same as, you know, telling everybody "Here's a card, write down your ideas" and then you collect them as a facilitator and write them on the wall, where everybody really has thought individually about something. So yeah, and sometimes I wasn't sure, because you could put up several responses, so you don't know who the responses are from. I don't know if you could see it as the organiser, but you could have 10 responses from one person and zero responses from another...

University

Finally, PR02 (below) reflected that it was important to hold technology firms and businesses accountable to avoid issues created by the abuse and/or concentration of power, as well as the mass manipulation and control of data (linking with section 5.9), reflecting that these issues are often overlooked in discussions around the challenges and opportunities for digital engagement. PR02 suggested that organisations need to be clear about the purpose of why they are collecting data, what they will do with it, who controls the data and has editing rights. Many of these issues are explored in more detail in the next section.

PR02: […] But I think this is a this is a problem about, you know, Google and Facebook... that they are totally opaque, it's not about the individual data, it's about control of society, and then use that data in, who knows what ways they are using it, and what access politicians have got to it. […]

[…] But it's absolutely critical. This is something that I think has been kind of overlooked in in digital terms, is the role of big businesses and the lack of transparency. And I think there are all these tools, but then there needs to be some sort of kind of accountability. […] Yeah, an abuse of abuse or concentration of power. […] it's the mass manipulation of its mass collection of data, and control of data.

PR02: I think when people migrate across to a digital platform, these are things that you really, really need to have control about. […] there needs to be transparency […] {and} I think it does so much come back to looking at what people {organisations} are trying to achieve. First of all, what's your aim? What's your goal? […] It's […] the concentration of power. […] So there's the same issues about, you know, who controls the data? But also, […] around privacy and around confidentiality, as well.

Education

This section has explored the challenges and opportunities for maintaining transparency and credibility during the digital engagement process and how this can impact stakeholder relationships. The next section explores issues related to the privacy and security of digital engagement and impacts on well-being.

5.9 Privacy, security, and well-being

This theme is about the challenges and opportunities related to the privacy and security of digital engagement, and its impact on the engagement process. This theme also includes perspectives of the impact of digital engagement on people's well-being and mental health. 24 interviewees[63] spoke about the interlinked issues of privacy, security, and digital well-being.

The findings presented in this section are summarised in Box 14.

Box 14. Summary of key findings: Privacy, security, and digital well-being

This theme is about the challenges and opportunities related to the privacy and security of digital engagement, and its impact on the engagement process. This theme also includes considerations about the impact of digital engagement on people's wellbeing and mental health.

- For some engagers, privacy and security issues were not a prominent consideration and the risks were handled according to GDPR regulations and/or organisational guidelines.
- There were some particular privacy and security considerations for digital engagement. Perceived risks included confidentiality and anonymity; bias and misrepresentation; data ownership, control, and safe storage; data ethics; and systemic issues including structural privacy.
- Digital and remote engagement can risk the wellbeing of both participants and those responsible for carrying out the engagement process. This included risks for physical and psychological health, such as digital fatigue, social isolation, and mental health.

5.9.1 Privacy and security

This section explores challenges and opportunities related to the privacy and security of digital and remote engagement, which can influence its effectiveness (23 out of 34 interviewees raised issues about this[64]).

For several interviewees (PR04, PR17, PR18, PR21), the use of digital tools did not result in any particular considerations for stakeholder engagement with regards to privacy and security

[63] Participant ID: (PR01, PR02, PR03, PR04, PR05, PR06, PR07, PR08, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR17, PR18, PR19, PR20, PR21, PR22, PR23, PR26, PR28, PR30).
[64] Participant ID: PR01, PR02, PR03, PR04, PR05, PR06, PR07, PR08, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR17, PR18, PR19, PR20, PR21, PR22, PR26, PR28, PR30.

risks. For example, PR18 (below) described how data is handled by the same process in their organisation, regardless of whether it is collected in-person or via digital methods. For PR18, these risks were handled as with any other engagement process, in line with GDPR regulations and organisational guidelines for ethics. Similarly, PR21 explained that privacy and security issues are managed as part of 'standard procedure' in their organisation and they were not aware of any specific rules of guidelines around the use of digital tools for engagement, compared to in-person.

PR18: We sort of follow the guidelines that all […] researchers would do. So if we're having conversations, you know, we make it quite clear from the start that we won't attribute comments to individuals […] I think we just sort of handle it as we would do with any sort of ethics framework […] in general. I think when doing things face to face, we run it similarly, saying if there's anything that you don't want down {recorded}, then you can just say at any point. […] I think the process is really the same with digital.

Government department

The majority of interviewees highlighted various challenges and considerations for digital engagement, including those related to confidentiality, data protection, and anonymity. For example, PR05 (below) explained that it was important to be transparent about recording engagement sessions.

PR05: So, obviously, I have to be really clear with people if we want to record it, I haven't wanted or needed to record any sessions yet. And, because they didn't have a Zoom account, funnily, I hosted meetings on behalf of another organisation […] and they asked me to record that session. So obviously, if you're going to record it, you have to be clear to all participants for that to happen. And I hope that they will now share the recording with all those people.

Charity/not-for-profit

Reflecting on their experiences as a participant of one online engagement session, PR08 (below) described the risk of recording 'general chit chat' online, explaining that some people could get 'caught out' by automatic recording. In another situation, PR20 described the potential risk of disclosing private information via the chat function on some digital platforms.

PR08: If people are going to record online meetings automatically, and maybe not tell people, then general chit chat could end up in the minutes... a garbled transcript with all your personal views... I mean, talk about GDPR. Me, for example, I'm a disruptor, I do all kinds of dire behaviours, but I'm also very careful when I talk to people to say, 'This is off the record.'. I think people could find themselves caught out by these automatic recordings and transcripts being produced ad-hoc.

Journalism and media

For other participants, some digital participatory approaches had much more prominent privacy and security issues. PR28 (below) spoke about various risks that needed to be considered and mitigated for when using a digital participatory mapping approach to engage stakeholders.

PR28: We also had to go through quite a few discussions around meeting the requirements for GDPR. So, on the new tool, people have to agree to terms and conditions. And we had to be really clear about the photographs people could submit, so things like you can't show people's faces. And there's an age restriction, under 16s or something weren't really supposed to find certain data... I think we've got around GDPR now because we're not identifying individuals, we're collecting district-level postcodes, so roughly the broad area that people are from. And if people mention names in the open text boxes, we have the right to remove it. So we were very clear about what we can and can't do.

Non-governmental public body

Building on the above quote, several interviewees (PR09, PR13, PR26, PR28) were concerned about the safe storage of data, including potentially identifiable (or sensitive) information. PR13 (below) described how they had to be cautious about collecting and storing location data, and any other identifiable information, via digital tools and platforms (as with any other method of data collection). Another interviewee (PR26) described how they had made changes to a digital platform to remove the requirement for registration for people to use it (thus removing the mandatory collection of personal and sensitive data) and enable participants to leave anonymous comments and share information confidentially.

PR13: Yeah, I mean, when we ask people for information, we do say don't give us anything too specific, that's why we try to make the categories broad... With stuff like location data, we say don't give us your full postcode, just the few letters... We want to know the area you live in, but we don't want the exact postcode, just the wider area. […] So yeah, we try and make it as safe as possible, online stuff... […] But yeah, it's a tricky situation. […]

Local authority

Several interview participants discussed specific ethical issues around the use and storage of location data (e.g., geotags and postcodes) and how to mitigate them (PR03, PR06, PR12, PR13). For example, PR06 (below) described some data privacy considerations with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping software. Similarly, PR03 explained that one risk of digital participatory mapping and GIS tools was being able to zoom into layers and access local and potentially identifiable data about a particular local area or community.

PR06: […] We've had a bit of trouble with data privacy on ESRI because filtering, because all those action points are on one data layer, so there's one massive spreadsheet that's spread around the {geographic area}, that's all geo located. And you can filter it per farm, so for example, I can filter it just on home farm, and they can just see those action points. But if you know how to use ArcGIS, you can turn that filter off, there's no way currently, if you're on the same map, for you to filter all of the points swiftly.

Charity/not-for-profit

Building on the above point, PR12 (below) explained that, from their perspective as someone who was involved in developing participatory mapping tools, the risk of stigmatising local areas was a concern (e.g., if people's personal data was linked to their negative opinions, and was publicly accessible, then this could lead to those people and/or areas being branded in a negative way by others).

PR12: It's interesting, I mean, I think my biggest concern for {online participatory mapping platform) would be if somebody looked with a magnifying glass at areas, are we stigmatising areas, for instance? I'm not worried about how we hold data and stuff like that, you know, we're more than GDPR compliant and we have safeguards built in, we keep sensitive personal data in a separate database, you can't actually link it to people's opinions. Because essentially, what we want to make sure is that if somebody uses the CSV {data file} download, they can't download data, which will cause really bad damage {to engagement participants}. Because once they downloaded it, you've got no control over it. So our view was, don't enable customers to download data that could get anyone into trouble.

A number of interview participants highlighted participant anonymity as a key consideration for digital engagement, as it would be with many forms of engagement (PR01, PR07, PR10, PR12, PR13, PR22, PR26, PR30). For example, PR07 (below) discussed potential risks and reflected on the importance of allowing participants to choose which digital platform they were most comfortable with.

PR07: Yeah, I mean, it will be interesting to see if people feel less secure, talking about things when it's virtual. But I haven't started the interviews yet and don't know for sure. But I guess it's about reiterating, you know, the fact that the data will be anonymised and not traced back to them, and that sensitive information won’t be shared... Also, that they don't have to answer questions if they feel uncomfortable. But I don't think other than people's general concerns about privacy and security, I don't think in terms of whether I can talk about sensitive topics, it would be any different, really. […] I said to my interview participants that we can use any medium that they are happy with. […] I've left it completely up to my participants to choose whichever is most comfortable for them. It'll be interesting to see whether there are any security concerns with particular technologies.

University

Some engagers felt that digital (remote) engagement meetings could be more transparent and open compared to in-person (linking with section 5.8.2), with some specific considerations for participants’ privacy and anonymity. PR01 (below) explained that online meetings often required participants to register and sign-in, therefore identifying themselves. PR01 also reflected that the right to anonymity in engagement meetings is important for some engagers. Similarly, in another situation, PR22 commented that: ‘If you're monitoring a project, perhaps if you're a developer, you quite often just want to go in and listen […] you have a right to watch the public meeting without having to explain who you are, because it's a public meeting’ (PR22).

PR01: Normally, if you go to a {in-person} community council meeting, or even a normal council meeting, you can be there in the public gallery and not have to identify yourself. And then now {online} you have to like sort of sign in, you need to get the access to the meeting and stuff. So I think that's been a bit controversial - where you previously could have anonymously gone, you've got to show your cards a bit more. And it's not that you're trying to spy on these meetings, but you've got every right as a member of the public to go to the meeting and not say who you are, whereas I think we've got to show our cards a bit more as to like, say who we are, be open about who we are. […]

But it's not also professional to hide who you are. So, you've got to put your identity out there. So, if you're acting on behalf of a developer, as part of a {consultancy}, you do feel like a spy, that you're listening in some of these meetings. I think people are more wary as to who is listening in. And they, they might be more likely to be, kind of introduced, so everyone knows who they are. Something {which is} an interesting thing {to explore} - how do you get around that fairness in how one engages?

Consultancy

Other engagers described issues related to recording online meetings. For PR30 (below), it was important to gain explicit permission from participants who could be uncomfortable about being recorded (and thus feel less comfortable to contribute to the discussion).

PR30: That's something we'd discussed - recording. So, when we've run events, people have said 'Are you going to record it? I can't come but are you going to record it?'. […] But with Zoom and community members, you can see why they might be uncomfortable with that {recording}. And you can see that if you were recording a session, people might not ask questions, they might keep something to themselves and not want to speak out. […]

Charity/not-for-profit

Building on the above point, PR30 (below) explained that although seeing people's facial reactions and body language was important (e.g., via webcam; also see section 4.7.3 non-verbal communication) people's comfort level around being recorded online is an important consideration when engaging around sensitive topics online.

PR30: When you're face to face to someone, body language and reactions are important. And you can react on Zoom, although I try and avoid looking at myself on it, but it's not quite the same as being face to face. When it's recorded, it's fine if it's just you seeing that - but what if it's shared further? […] I think when you're looking at sensitive subjects it's tricky, really.

Charity/not-for-profit

Several interviewees highlighted security issues with specific videoconferencing platforms (PR01, PR07, PR19, PR20, PR22, PR30). For example, PR01 (below) described a perceived security risk of 'Zoom bombings' during online engagement sessions, which resulted in heavy controls with registration and sign-in (which could have a knock-on effect on participants' ability to contribute to discussions anonymously, as discussed earlier in this section).

PR01: From a company perspective, we've been doing a few webinars. […] And obviously, that was delivered digitally. And it's just really interesting, the different formats, […] I mean that's going back to the networking type of events, but how differently they are all being run. So, when you're not running it yourself - this was {webinar} run through {a property and planning organisation} - they have kind of got strict rules about how they let people in, and they're worried about the security of anybody randomly coming into it and watching it and hijacking it with horrible questions. So, they've adopted some quite heavy policing, where you have to sign in, and you have to say who you are before you're let in, but other ones have been quite open, you know, they just let anybody in to join the discussion.

Charity/not-for-profit

Finally, several interviewees discussed wider and more structural privacy issues which could impact the effectiveness of engagement processes (PR02, PR05, PR07, PR12). This is linked to the structural issues around transparency and corporate accountability which are discussed at the end of section 5.8.2. For example, PR05 (below) was personally concerned about the ownership and control of large amounts of data by private corporations.

PR05: And I guess there is a part of me, and again, this is me personally, not professionally. Like, we don't have a, you know, an Alexa or whatever the Google versions called, because, you know, it's verging on conspiracy theories I suppose, but there is a thing that suddenly, people have even greater access to even more conversations that you're having. And there's something about that really doesn't sit easily with me. I like that Zoom is still, as far as I'm aware, independently owned, that will not be the case for much longer, they'll wait until it absolutely peaks, and then they'll sell it to either Google or Apple, presumably. And at that point, they're not selling an online video conferencing platform, they're selling access to huge amounts of data about people's decision-making.

Charity/not-for-profit

The next section is about the digital well-being risks associated with digital engagement.

5.9.2 Digital well-being

In addition to privacy and security risks, the results suggested that digital (remote) tools and technologies can also risk the well-being of both participants and engagers. 14 interviewees[65] raised challenges and opportunities for both physical and psychological health, including the risk of digital fatigue, social isolation, and mental health. Interviewees emphasised the importance of maintaining face-to-face engagement and promoting meaningful social interaction for mental health (e.g., linking with section 5.7).

For example, a number of interviewees described issues related to digital fatigue, which can be defined as the state of exhaustion and disengagement which occurs when people are required to use digital tools consistently (PR01, PR05, PR19, PR20, PR21, PR26, PR28). In the quote below, PR28 described online engagement sessions as ‘exhausting’ compared to in-person events, partly due to the lack of distractions such as informal in-person conversations over food and drink.

[65] Participant ID: PR01, PR05, PR06, PR07, PR08, PR09, PR11, PR19, PR20, PR21, PR22, PR23, PR26, PR28, PR30

PR28: What is also exhausting. It's, you know, it's one thing going to a full day event and being able to sit down and chat to people and have cake. And then it's quite another having, you know, for back-to-back room calls. I just find it so much more exhausting than anything else. And my brain just goes completely dead.

Non-departmental public body

Building on the above quote, PR19 explained why colleagues found the intensity of online meetings – with less opportunity for distraction and 'natural breaks' - much more difficult to manage (linking with many of the issues discussed in section 5.7).

PR19: {Online meetings are} definitely more intense. And also, you have to hold your focus for much longer on an online meeting. Because everybody's looking at you. It's not like you're looking around the room where you might see some people, or you might not, you can look away, look at the clock, go and get a cup of tea, and stuff like that. So, with the big board meetings, for example, we've had to plan specific break times where we'll stop, leave, and come back again. Which we probably wouldn't have done normally, you'd have just taken a natural break. So yes, I think the intensity is much harder to manage. I think the concentration is higher during the meetings, than it might have been in person. It's also more difficult to carry humour around.

Housing association

For PR07 (below), even when breaks were scheduled during online meetings for more informal and social conversation, they remained online and created a more fatiguing situation.

PR19: […] But I just think, yeah, it's constant online, like we've been having these virtual tea and coffee breaks. And it's like, "oh, that's really nice. Because I can still socialise with people", and then like, a few weeks in you're like, "well that means that my coffee breaks are still spent in front of a computer!" So, it's not actually a break.

University

PR20 (below) highlighted the mental health and wellbeing impacts of looking at a digital screen for an extended period of time, reflecting on the importance of giving people the opportunity to not have their cameras and videos turned on and having regular breaks.

PR20: […] And I also think, this is probably another area of research, is around fatigue. […] But because so many people are now using online meetings, you get people that are doing almost back-to-back video calls, and I think part of it is maybe seeing yourself on the screen... […] I think there's research around it, that might be interesting to look at. Just all mental health and wellbeing side of it.

[…] So, lots of {online} presentations at the beginning and then everyone had a chance to say three minutes about themselves, and you can imagine that suddenly that's three hours, even if everyone's being quite succinct and sticking to time. But in the middle of the programme at lunchtime, they basically asked everyone to go outside. It was optional, but - go outside, take some pictures, but them on social media, take a bit of quiet time amongst the trees or whatever you can find. And I think that's really valuable. I'm quite interested in that health and wellbeing side of nature. And whether it's digital or physical meetings, even, some of the best physical meetings I've had are walking meetings, just getting outside. […]

Consultancy

PR05 (below) explored the benefits of interacting with people in-person for mental health and wellbeing benefits (linking with section 5.7), reflecting that the emotional bonds between people are strengthened more in-person compared to online with importance for improving mental health. They comment that seeing people in-person is a 'fundamental aspect of being human' (linking to other quotes about the fundamental importance of human-to-human interaction explored in section 5.7).

PR05: Personally, to be honest, I have found that there are a huge number of positives in working in this {online} way, compared to working face to face. I think, you know, obviously, face to face interaction is vital for societal cohesion, and for individuals' mental health. And I surely miss it. […] being able to see people's faces massively helps with relationships and sense of feeling like you are part of something, which is obviously really important for a charity/not-for-profit. But I would just be wary that, you know, {when you have} been on calls all day long, and it's exhausting sometimes {so you need to be aware about digital fatigue}.

PR05: However, {in my organisation}, people need to speak to each other - bonds are strengthened enormously. It's so vital for mental health. I've been working with {stakeholders} and they're fully expecting a mental health pandemic off the back of this. And we're going to have a recession, which is going to reduce the ability for our social care sector to provide the necessary services to combat that mental health pandemic. […] Because {seeing people in-person} is a fundamental aspect of being human. And in that respect, face to face meetings definitely will continue, but they will be replaced in a lot of circumstances that only happen when you need to, or people feel like they need.

Charity/not-for-profit

For PR08, mental health was a key consideration – particularly in more rural and remote areas where people could be excluded from digital engagement (linking with the digital accessibility challenges discussed in section 5.4).

PR08: Going into lockdown, I think I went into a mental lockdown myself. What I mean by that is that I went very quiet. I did definitely lock down; I didn't really correspond. Zoom calls started, then - people started talking to their families, Zoom made it quite exciting. I'm talking about this generally.

[…] I mean, I think I may have hinted during our earlier discussion, I talk about it in my {online media platforms}, but the mental health of people in the deep countryside not being able to engage.

Rural journalism

This section has explored the challenges and opportunities related to privacy, security, and digital well-being. The next section considers the importance of feedback and evaluation.

5.10 Feedback and participant experience

Feedback was understood in different ways by interview participants, with 24 interviewees[66] offering diverse perspectives. For example, feedback was referred to in terms of user (e.g., participant) experience and useability of engagement tools and approaches, including perspectives on the effectiveness of online methods. Feedback was also considered in terms of project and/or decision-making outcomes, often used synonymously with engagement to refer to a two-way exchange of information (i.e., the term 'feedback' was used to describe the purpose of the engagement process itself, for example, to get feedback from local communities about a development project). Although there was a lot of overlap and ambiguity between different types of 'feedback', this section focuses on the interpretation of feedback as user (participant) experience of the engagement process and tools/approaches used.

The findings in this section are presented in Box 15.

Box 15. Summary of key findings: Feedback and participant experience

This theme is about the different ways that 'feedback' was understood by interview participants, focusing on the use of the term to refer to user experience and the perceived useability of digital engagement tools and approaches.

- 'Feedback' about the effectiveness of the engagement process was often described as informal and anecdotal. For example, feedback appeared to be unplanned and ad-hoc and/or it was not explicitly stated whether feedback was based on empirical data collected from participants.
- Some engagers highlighted a need for embedding a continuous and formal evaluation process for engagement in their organisations.
- Several engagers described how they had collected feedback from engagement participants about their experiences. For example, using different online tools for capturing feedback was described as beneficial.

5.10.1 Participant views of digital engagement

Like other themes in this chapter, the results in this section paint a complex and messy picture of digital engagement and its fundamental links with systemic, contextual, and organisational factors (e.g., the factors explored in Chapter 6). As interviewees discussed the challenges and opportunities for digital engagement, they touched on several broader issues regarding the

[66] Participant ID: R01, PR02, PR04, PR05, PR06, PR07, PR08, PR10, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR16, PR17, PR18, PR20, PR21, PR22, PR23, PR25, PR26, PR27, PR28, PR29, PR30, PR31, PR34

challenged related to evaluating engagement. While some interviewees collected feedback as part of a formal procedure in their organisation, others stated that they were unable to do this (e.g., due to time constraints). The majority of interviewees described participant feedback on digital engagement as ad-hoc and anecdotal. Many interviewees highlighted lessons learnt and the need for more robust ways of measuring feedback in the future.

Feedback processes were described as informal and anecdotal, with interviewees using tentative language (e.g., 'I *think* that feedback has been positive/negative…') rather than reference to a formal process. For example, PR22 (below) explained that while gaining feedback from participants about the effectiveness of the engagement itself was not the main purpose, they felt that it would be interesting to find out participants' experiences of engaging online.

Interviewer:	Will you get a sense of how the participants have found the experience of engaging online?
PR22:	Maybe, but for us the purpose of the event is not to try and work out how the online methods compare to something different, although we do want to make sure that the methods are as effective as possible. The event that we're having, and the purpose of it, is to get their feedback on the project. But I think there are people on there who obviously will have opinions about it, and as {part of our organisation}, and as someone who does consultation engagement, I'll be very interested to see how people have found engaging online. I've tried to join a lot of different online events, like webinars and things like that, to get a feel for how they work, what works well, what doesn't work well, to help gain some experience and guide the process.

Consultancy

Several engagers (PR04, PR05, PR14, PR16, PR18, PR30) believed that they had received positive feedback from the participants of their digital engagement sessions, however, often used tentative or ambiguous language and did not explicitly state whether this was based on data. For example, PR14 (below) explains that they had 'anecdotal' information about engagement participants' perspectives of online meetings.

PR14:	Yeah, that {participants' views of the effectiveness of digital engagement} would be interesting to find out me. And totally, within museums, some people found that the online meetings are more productive than the in-person meetings, that people who may be completely quiet in a in person meeting kind of speak up a bit more, which I found was interesting. But that's just kind of anecdotally, it's something my colleagues have mentioned.

Museum

PR01 (below) reflected that that had not yet had any opportunity to conduct any formal feedback with their engagement participants, however indicated that it would be useful to explore in future events.

PR01: We haven't had that opportunity {to collect feedback from engagement participants} yet, no. So that would be useful feedback. Actually, that's something that's worth linking into the events that we're organising, as to how people feel. […]

Consultancy

PR05 (below) described how they had received some informal verbal feedback from participants about their experiences of digital engagement sessions. Like PR14, they describe their interpretation of others' experiences of digital engagement as 'anecdotal'.

PR05: Um, I've had lots of people say to me, "I can't wait till we can meet up face to face". And I think I've had a couple of comments along the lines of "Well, I think that was that that went really well, it went as well as it could have done considering we did it online". Comments like that. That's not my opinion, that's not my feeling of it. But that is obviously some people's feelings of it.

And I think what I've been surprised by is how much better the senior stakeholders have taken to this. […] And so, I think that maybe this is anecdotal, it's just my observation, but I wonder if there's a divide between more junior people not buying into the online stuff as much as more senior people. It seems to have pivoted it better, I feel, but that's anecdotal.

Charity/not-for-profit

Similarly, PR30 (below) had received verbal feedback but did not mention how feedback was collected, or whether this was part of a formal process.

PR30: I think we've had some really positive responses back, that they enjoyed it, you know - "Oh, we found this OK, we've not done it before, we've not done a meeting through Zoom before". You know, they've probably had a family Zoom call but nothing like this. So, we had a lot of good feedback like: "thank you for that. There's a lot to digest, but the information came across really well", which is which is good.

Charity/not-for-profit

PR18 (below) explained that it was difficult to get feedback from stakeholders, reflecting that while stakeholders seemed 'keen to engage' they did not personally feel that digital tools were the most effective method. However, PR18 did not mention whether they had collected feedback from stakeholders directly.

Interviewer:	Did you collect any feedback from the {stakeholders} about different {engagement} approaches? Did you gain any sort of insight from the {stakeholders} […]?
PR18:	I think it's difficult because the ones {engagement} that we did via Zoom were very COVID specific, so we all kind of acknowledged that there was this issue that we wanted to talk about. And they were keen to engage with us on it. And we were really keen to engage with them on it. And I don't… I don't feel like... As I said earlier, I don't feel like it would be the ideal way to engage with {stakeholders} anyway, because of this trust issue. But I don't have a lot of experience engaging with them, more like one or two at a time.

Government department

Several engagers (PR01, PR02, PR06, PR10, PR12, PR17, PR21) had collected feedback from participants about their experience of digital engagement, including tools they had used to collect it. In the quote below, PR21 described how their team/organisation collected feedback from engagement participants. They also reflected that there had been a 'big push' from their organisation to improve feedback. PR21 emphasised the importance of exploring gaps in perceptions of the useability of digital engagement, for example, investigating what engagers think compared to what stakeholder participants think.

PR21:	We do capture feedback. And yeah, that's been a big push from our side, to get feedback. Because there's no point in going out there and just relying on your own impression of what's happened in a group. Frankly, when you're so focused on other things, you're probably not going to always take that in. Normally, they're an opportunity for farmers to re-emphasise key points, you know - "That's a terrible idea", "Please deal with X, Y, Z, because that's our main bugbear", or whatever. […] I think it would be really interesting to explore this gap in perception of the usability of the engagement - so what researchers, and policy makers, etc. think versus what the {stakeholders} actually think. I anticipate that a lot of farmers would be like 'it's great if they do something about it'. Maybe also whether there's something emotional they get from it, and maybe if there's anything they'd like to see off the back of engagement, like a document or other kinds of feedback.

Government department

PR02, PR06, PR10 and PR17 had found that using different online techniques were beneficial for collecting feedback. For example, PR02 had used livestreaming with a chat function to get ‘live’ feedback from participants, and PR17 described how they had collected asynchronous feedback from participants via a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and instant messaging social platform. PR10 had used polling software to ‘superficially’ gather feedback from participants during an engagement session, however reflected on the limitations and value of this – for example, that the questions they used were too open and produced quite generic feedback from participants. PR06 (below) described how they received positive feedback from stakeholders about the use of particular digital methods for engagement. Specifically, podcasts were perceived as beneficial as fit well in participants’ busy lifestyles.

PR06: But what we've been really getting good feedback from, especially from farmers, is podcasts. So, like voice notes. Because these guys are up so early in the morning, they're in a tractor camp most of the day if they're arable farmers, or they're out with the livestock and don't have time to read some things. So, when we got the report {published}, no one really read it. So, we did an audio version of it so they can listen to it {and also} […] monthly updates. We've done some podcasts and need to do some more. I just I think they are a good medium. And as long as you host them somewhere that you can keep track of who's listening, like SoundCloud or you can see view counts, and just constantly signposting people to the same page […].

Charity/not-for-profit

This theme has explored some of the issues related to collecting feedback from engagement participants and/or evaluating the engagement process. The next section explores interviewees’ perspectives on what more effective engagement strategies will look like in the future.

5.11 Effective engagement approaches

This section focuses on interviewees’ perspectives of what more effective engagement will (or should) look like in the future, particularly when considering the various challenges and opportunities for digital and remote engagement included in this chapter. This links to, and is developed, later in the thesis in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8.

First, section 5.11.1 explores interviewees’ perspectives on flexible and mixed-methods (hybrid, digital and in-person) approaches for engagement. Interviewees were asked about what they thought the future would look like in terms of best practice for stakeholder engagement, for example, in terms of the balance of the use of in-person and digital methods through hybrid approaches. For example, whether (and why) engagement should be ‘digital first’, ‘in-person first’, or a mix throughout the process. In summary, the effectiveness of different methods depends on the context and purpose of the engagement process: there is no 'one-size-fits-all' best practice approach. Building on the previous sections in this chapter, this theme explores and summarises the factors which influence the effectiveness of different in-person, digital, and hybrid approaches in various environment and planning contexts.

Section 5.11.2 explores interviewees' perspectives on the value of this research and the findings for their work. Towards the end of each interview, participants were asked about their thoughts on the utility of this research for their work, their team or organisation, or the sector more broadly. Interviewees also suggested diverse methods for disseminating the findings of the research in a way that would be useful and accessible to them.

The findings presented in this section are summarised in Box 16 below.

Box 16. Summary of key findings: Effective engagement approaches.

This theme is about interviewees' perspectives of what effective engagement processes should include, particularly when considering the complex and interlinked challenges and opportunities explored in this chapter (summarised in boxes 7-15).

- Effective engagement should be flexible and adapted to the context and purpose in which is it needed. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach for engagement: one tool cannot solve all issues and methods need to be adapted to individual needs, as well as project and organisational requirements.
    - Engagement approaches need to be adapted to the needs and requirements of stakeholders. It is important for engagers to find out how stakeholders want to be engaged with.
    - It is important to trial lots of different (online and offline) approaches to test 'what works' in different situations. This was described as a flexible, creative, and iterative process of experimentation (trial and error) with the opportunity to learn from mistakes.
- Effective engagement should involve a flexible blend of in-person, digital, and hybrid (a mix of in-person and digital) approaches. This should be adapted to the context and purpose of engagement, with awareness that this could (and should) change throughout the engagement process.
- A number of practitioners reflected on what factors made digital and in-person methods more suitable in different contexts and at different stages of the engagement process (e.g., for some, digital was more effective at the start. But for others in-person methods were more effective).
- The interviewees made detailed suggestions about generating outputs from this research in ways that were useful and accessible to them. For example: guidance booklets, webinars, training, website page/s, infographics, etc.
    - Learning from the diverse experiences of others – transcending disciplinary, organisational, sectoral boundaries – was important. Case studies of the challenges, as well as the benefits, of engagement was highlighted as particularly useful (e.g., learning from mistakes).

5.11.1 Flexible, adaptable, and hybrid engagement

The is chapter has explored various perspectives on the value of flexible and adaptable engagement processes which use hybrid (online and in-person) methods. 22 interviewees[67] specifically discussed the value of flexible approaches to engagement which could be adapted to the context and purpose in which it is needed. Responses included reflecting on the value of a blend of in-person, digital (remote), and hybrid methods through both synchronous and

[67] Participant ID: PR01, PR02, PR04, PR05, PR06, PR08, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR15, PR17, PR18, PR20, PR21, PR22, PR24, PR25, PR26, PR27, PR29, PR30, PR31

asynchronous forms of communication. The majority of interview participants explained that there was no ‘one size fits all’ approach to public and stakeholder engagement.

For example, PR20 (below) noted that instead of saying that engagement should be digital only, or that it should be a blend of in-person and online engagement, there are more fundamental aspects which explain what works.

PR20: The way I look at it, […] it would be easy to say, "well there needs to be a mix", or, you know, "everything should be digital" […] You know, we've shown that we can do it {digital engagement}, there are drawbacks in some ways but that {but}, we've shown that we can do it. […] But I think there's a more fundamental aspect to it. […] Different work requires different tools.

Consultancy

PR02 (below) explained that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach that fits all situations; effective engagement involves matching the approach (including specific methods and tools used) to the context in which it is needed. PR02 emphasises the importance of pragmatically thinking about what you are trying to achieve through engagement, including the needs and requirements of stakeholders, and adapting approaches accordingly.

PR02: There's not one answer, you can't have one answer fits all. And it's almost like you want to kind of draw out - what are the common threads running through out there? […] whatever the actual kind of fundamental aspects are, {the} fundamental common threads are, […] and draw up some kind of conclusions and just have some sort of guidelines […]

And it cuts across the board, you've always got to continually ask yourself – ‘How will this be useful for people? And how can they use this?’. And it's not about my situation, it's not about what I know, it's about the transmission of knowledge, and the kind of understanding of different structures and then be able to, to put that idea across. […] It's that people could then go, ‘Okay, how do I apply this {method}? How do I take this and use it? How do I how is this useful?’.

[…] But I think it does so much come back to looking at what people are trying to achieve. First of all, yes, it's so about, what's your what's your what's your aim? What's your goal? Like with them? I just think about it. I mean, this is this is the interesting thing.

Non-departmental public body

Building on the above points, PR01 (below) explained that engagement practitioners need to design an approach which is ‘bespoke to each project and… that area’ by selecting appropriate methods, and best practice approaches, depended on various local contextual factors, community needs and requirements, and demographic characteristics. PR01 also highlights the importance of engaging communities early on in the engagement process, as well as facilitating more bottom-up and co-design approaches.

PR01: I think every what, you know, I've done engagement on […] projects for years, but actually, it's quite interesting now dealing with these major controversial things - like significant infrastructure projects, etc. and major urban extensions - that there's no one size fits all. And I think you have to be bespoke to each project and understand that area - every area has different needs, and each community's got different issues.

So yeah, I think it's a matter of understanding what that community's needs are and going in {engaging} at an early stage, so that actually you can iron out any issues that they may have. And particularly with, say, major infrastructure projects, that you can have those conversations early enough that they their comments are influencing designs, and not be on the backfoot that "Oh, you've designed this, and you'll check it with the community, and go ahead anyway", but it should be more of a bottom-up approach. […] It {engagement approach} depends on the demographic of the community […], I think it very much does depend on who you're dealing with. […]

Consultancy

Similarly, PR22 (below) highlighted the importance of adapting engagement to suit stakeholder needs and according to the type of development, local demographics, the history of engagement, political factors, the scale of the project and characteristics of the local area, and so forth.

PR22: It's engaging with people so that they can look at it in a way that suits them. […] I think it depends on the size of the project, the local situation... [..] {Or}, you know, how important is it {the development} within the community […] I think it depends on certain factors, you know, where is it in planning policy? Are you going aggressively against planning policy? Is it allocated? What's the policy behind it? So, there's lots of different things, like whether there are any specific issues that need addressing... […] So I don't take a "one approach fits everyone" approach to consultation. I very much think that consultation needs to be tailored, it needs to change. And it needs to be appropriate as well.

Consultancy

In the quote below, PR09 explained it is important to use a blend of creative methods that integrate different qualitative and quantitative knowledge types. They reflect that there will never be an 'optimum blend', while emphasising the importance of expanding the toolkit ('armoury') for engagement This point is expanded on throughout the rest of this section; other interviewees emphasised the need for multiple tools for engagement and experimenting with 'what works'.

PR09: And I think what's really interesting, and I can't think of anything else right now, but I think what's really interesting […] is to think about some of these creative methods and how and how they can be adapted for different situations. […] And I think being able to blend those different creative methods together, because one approach won't work for everyone. […] I don't think there would ever be an optimum blend {of digital and in-person engagement}. […] And it's very context specific. It's very specific to the question you're trying to explore, and the groups that you're trying to explore that with. […] I think that I think that developing that armoury is so important, and that's perhaps something that we're not so good at, at the moment, you know.

Non-departmental public body

The majority of engagers reflected on the importance of adapting engagement processes to stakeholder need. For example, PR06 (below) explained that engagers should not just think about themselves and the needs of the project or organisation, but also think about stakeholder participants' own needs and requirements. PR06 also mentioned that they were 'playing it by ear', trying lots of different engagement approaches to see what worked, in an attempt to engage as many stakeholders as they could.

PR06: So actually, maybe we should be not just thinking about ourselves, we should be thinking about what other people want to see - if we keep it online, no one's excluded, if we go to a site visit and some people don't want to come, we therefore inadvertently exclude people that we wanted to engage in the first place. So, I guess we are literally playing it by ear, winging it, which is the honest answer, but in a structured way, and hoping to engage as many people as we can.

PR06: […] I think there's definitely a need for a case-by-case basis. I'm sure there's a number of projects that you could tar with the same brush, […] just digitally, because it saves time for everyone […]. But yeah, considering the people is really important; how well do the people adapt to technology, are they shy, will they work well in a group...? All these things, especially if you haven't met them before, you just don't know.

Charity/not-for-profit

Building on the above points, most engagers spoke about the importance of taking a hybrid approach to engagement which involved a flexible blend of both digital and in-person methods (PR04, PR05, PR06, PR08, PR09, PR10, PR11, PR13, PR14, PR15, PR16, PR17, PR18, PR19, PR20, PR21, PR22, PR23, PR24, PR26, PR28, PR29, PR30). For example, PR30 (below) explained that a blended approach to engagement is most effective for their work due to the particular benefits of engaging online (e.g., efficiency, time savings; see sections 5.3 and 5.4) and in-person (e.g., for having more in-depth, informal, and spontaneous conversations with people, and conducting site visits, see section 5.7).

PR30: I suppose it could depend on the project, but my gut feeling would be that it's a blend. […] Sometimes, for example, I've had to drive somewhere for 45 minutes for a 30-minute conversation, to then have to come back. So you could move some of those online {and} you're saving a massive chunk of time and money getting there. But there are other things where you really do need to be there face to face with people. […] For example, for us, getting people together when we do some of those council-wide events, actually that benefit that people have of those side conversations in between sessions, or when you give them that coffee time at the beginning and end. There's so much value in them talking to their peers and sharing ideas, other than just us imparting knowledge to them. […] I guess you could replace some things with a Zoom call, but there's always going to be a case for actually being there physically with people.

And then with the environment work, actually, sometimes you do really need face to face because you want to have that chat. You might be able to have a Zoom conversation about the generality of things, but you're going to need to be out there on the groups with them physically, looking at things. […] So I think it's definitely going to be a blend.

Charity/not-for-profit

For PR13 (below), the future of engagement will be a more even split between in-person and online meetings. They describe how their organisation had been pushing towards more digital and remote engagement in recent years (accelerated by the pandemic), which was beneficial because it helped to mitigate the risk of conflict with public and stakeholder participants. Chapter 6 explores the perceived risk of conflict from an organisational and staff perspective in more depth.

PR13: Just in the last year or so, we've tried to push more of the digital aspect. […] I guess it's going to be a bit of a 50/50 split {between digital and in-person engagement}. Before, there's been talks in the council to completely scrap {in-person} consultations because a couple did get pretty... I mean, some people basically had a fight in the car park. From a health and safety point of view, should we be putting ourselves in these situations? By moving the consultation online, yes you might cut people out from engaging, but then there's that risk of putting staff in the firing line if people get aggressive in person events... So, we've sort of paddled back from that, it was a bit of a knee jerk reaction, but it's definitely something that we are more wary of. If we get a series of events going that way, we might move {them} online from a safety point of view, but we're not keen to do that because obviously, we want to engage as much of the local community as a whole. So, it's an exercise of trying to cast the net as much as possible - trying to do the online stuff as much as possible, but also keeping the physical format, face to face.

Local authority

Several interview participants emphasised the value of using – and experimenting with - lots of different digital and in-person methods for engagement and finding out what works (PR06, PR13, PR14, PR26, PR30). For example, PR26 (below) spoke about value of having a broad range of digital tools for engagement on offer, reflecting that those engaging do not have to use all of them. Instead, the best thing to do is to sequentially trial different approaches and use several tools at the same time, seeing what works best in different situations.

PR26: I think because we have such a broad range of tools, people often think that they have to use all of them, but it doesn't really work like that. The best way to do it is sequentially, or bouncing a couple of tools off each other, depending on what you want to achieve from it. For example, start with a discussion forum, if you find some really valuable insight in the discussion forum, you might then say, "right, this is really, really interesting, we'll now run a survey based on it", we can find out what's driving the thoughts in the community around this specific issue. We want to drill down further, let's get people to share their stories about it, then, and give them an opportunity to tell in a longer form tool, how that would look as well.

PR26: […] There is always going to be a group of people who would rather go to a face-to-face event, and meet people in person, and have their say at that event. There's nothing wrong with that. So our approach is, the more people that are involved, the better - whether that be in a face to face environment, or online - having as many options as possible, so as many people can be involved as possible, at all times.

Software company

Building on the above quote, PR09 (below) explained that it is important to use a blend of creative methods that integrate different qualitative and quantitative knowledge types, and that there will never be an 'optimum blend' for engagement. They emphasise the importance of expanding the toolkit of engagement methods and approaches.

PR09: […] I think what's really interesting […] is to think about some of these creative methods and how and how they can be adapted for different situations. […] And I think being able to blend those different creative methods together, because one approach won't work for everyone. So, if you're trying to get people who, you know, aren't users of the internet, or don't have access or sufficient access to the internet, you know, there's online methods work, and finding different ways to reach out to those groups and blend those in with other data collection methods, I think would be really, really worthwhile. […] I don't think there would ever be an optimum blend {of digital and in-person engagement}. […] And it's very context specific. It's very specific to the question you're trying to explore, and the groups that you're trying to explore that with. […] I think that I think that developing that armoury is so important, and that's perhaps something that we're not so good at, at the moment, you know.

Non-departmental public body

Several interviewees believed that digital and remote engagement would become the most prominent form of engagement in the future (e.g., PR04, PR05, PR15, PR22, PR24, PR29). For example, PR05 (below) explained that while blended engagement will remain important in the future, they believed that digital technology would have more weight compared to in-person techniques. Similarly, PR24 believed that digital engagement would become the 'working norm' compared to before the pandemic.

PR05: {We will have} both {in-person and digital engagement}. Well, I think digital methods will continue to have much more weight. We have been talking, I said "we", the sustainability sector, has been talking about video conferencing instead of face-to-face meetings for years, for decades. And everyone said, "Oh, no, it will never replace face to face meeting. You can't do business without those meetings.". COVID has single handily shown us that you can do anything if the business case is strong enough

Charity/not-for-profit

Other engagers felt that digital (remote) and in-person methods were more appropriate and effective at different stages in the engagement process. On one hand, digital tools were perceived as more appropriate to use at the start of projects to scope out broad topics from a wide range of people, compared to in-person techniques which could be used more selectively to capture local, in-depth knowledge. PR04 (below) reflected that as a result of an increased uptake of digital engagement, face-to-face meetings will become more selective and targeted to a specific purpose. Other interviewees also thought this (PR04, PR15, PR22, PR25, PR29).

PR04: So, I think people will become much more blended in the way they do these things, and they might choose to have larger meetings... I had a meeting last week with 40 people, and it wasn't a problem. You know, you can see who's there, you can see who's talking. And it might be that we just have more intimate meetings, face to face, and larger meetings, collectively {online}. […] So, it's transformative for a lot of people to go electronic, and therefore, I think we will be much more selective about face to face. […] So, it's not an either/or approach. So, it works quite well like that.

Charity/not-for-profit

Building on the above quote, PR29 described how they think that engagement is best practice when conducted in an 'hourglass' way, starting with online group meetings to discuss concepts at a larger scale, then focusing on more local areas and in-depth information through face-to-face techniques. They also highlighted the value of building relationships with stakeholders through training and piloting digital tools (linking with section 5.5).

PR29: And so that's what I'd say, the bigger the concept is, the more it can be done online. And the narrower, the more localised, and the more specific is, I think it needs to be face to face. […] So, I think, it's almost like when people talk about doing things in an hourglass way... You know, start with the big webinars, the big concepts that are national, or regional level, or whatever. Then focus on the local areas and do them face to face.

And also train them and provide them with the software to do webinars and online calls, so that you don't always have to spend the time doing the face to face, but you've got that relationship there, and they're comfortable, and you've shown them how to use the software. And then you can go back to doing webinars again. That'd how I would do it.

University

On the other hand, other engagers thought that in-person approaches were essential towards the start of the engagement process. This included the importance of in-person engagement for building face-to-face approaches for building trust with participants (section 5.8), fostering informal conversations (5.7), and so forth. For example, PR16 (below) explained that although they received positive feedback from participants of a recent digital engagement session, it was only possible because they had already built trusting relationships with stakeholders in-person. In another situation, PR06 explained that in some situations, the value of in-person site visits with stakeholders (in their situation, visits to farms) could not effectively and meaningfully be replaced by digital and remote techniques.

PR16: […] Because, like, although our feedback from the webinars for the {stakeholder} groups went well, I think they only went well because we'd already build that relationship with them in person, over several months of multiple, you know, workshops, and so they were willing to do it then because they knew what we were about. And it's so important to have, you know, when we were doing multiple workshops with the same people, to have the same staff, because it is all about building that rapport, and that trust with people... they feel like they can open up.

Yeah, so when it comes to the future, I think where we use digital, and where we use face to face, it's really got to be tailored very carefully to the audience. And I do feel like digital will help in some cases for it to me more inclusive some people. But generally, yeah, I definitely don't see it {digital} as a replacement.

Government department

PR21 (below) explained that although there will be more scope for digital engagement in the future, digital approaches can be 'rigid' and improvements need to be made so that more flexible, sustained, and casual engagement can be conducted online. They reflect on an inherent 'desire for human contact' which cannot be replaced by digital engagement. PR21 also highlighted the risk that stakeholders could view digital engagement techniques as tokenistic and not as collaborative as in-person approaches (e.g., linking to section 5.7.5).

PR21: […] Maybe as a result of COVID there will be more scope for online working {but} that makes it a little bit rigid. And I think the online stuff could be a bit more informal, a bit more flexible, and maybe a bit more responsive as well. So you could get a little bit more sustained, frequent, and more casual engagement as well, that way. I mean, I'm really theorising there, because I don't think it's been trialled yet. […]

But I still think that... There is just in the general population, a desire for that human contact, and just being in the same space. […] Because also, if we went for too much in the way of online and digital stuff, it could just be seen as another consultation style approach where people are feeding in, and you're going "oh, right, yeah, whatever", and then you go off and do your own thing anyway. Maybe it doesn't fully register. And then {stakeholders} might feel a bit used, it's just another form of digital engagement, it's not really about engagement or collaboration, but about ticking a box and saying you've spoken to them before you carry on with some policy, or whatever it is.

Government department

This section explored practitioners' views on effective engagement strategies in the future, focusing on a flexible and adaptable mix of hybrid, in-person, and digital (remote) approaches. The next section is about practitioners' perspectives on the utility of this research and how the findings could be disseminated.

5.11.2 Utility of research and dissemination

At the end of each interview, participants were also asked about their thoughts on the utility of this research for them (23 interviewees provided information[68]). In response, interviewees described the type of outputs from the research which would be useful to their work, their organisation, and/or engagement research and practice in general. Findings include the need for case study examples of how different approaches worked (or did not work) for other people, promoting knowledge transfer and shared learning between different teams, organisations, and sectors. In particular, interviewees emphasised the importance of learning about the risks and challenges for digital engagement (and engagement in general, see Chapter 6) – and how to mitigate them – as well as the benefits and considerations for best practice. Interviewees suggested that the evidence for what works and case studies could come in the form of a free online booklet, a Wikipedia-style page, a website, podcasts, infographics, training sessions, or a combination of different materials. Many participants also shared examples of best practice methods of disseminating information in this way.

A number of interviewees highlighted the importance of learning from others' experiences of conducting engagement, for example, from different organisations, disciplines, sectors, and so forth (PR08, PR10, PR13, PR18, PR19, PR22, PR25, PR26, PR29). In particular, interviewees desired more opportunities to learn about the risks of engagement (and how to mitigate them) as well as the benefits. For example, PR19 (below) suggested that it would be useful to learn about how other practitioners are conducting engagement, their reaction to common issues, and so forth. PR19 explains that this can enhance organisational learning about engagement practices.

PR19: Well, it's always useful to know what other people are doing, and what their reaction to the same situation is? You know, we've done what we've done on the basis of what we thought, but you can always learn from someone else. […] Some people might have tried stuff and it's been super successful, that we might not have thought of. Other people might have tried stuff and it hasn't worked for them. And there's a great learning opportunity there because you can take those ideas back to your organisation and say - this organisation, they did this and were really successful. So, you can learn from that.

Housing association

[68] Participant ID: PR03, PR06, PR08, PR10, PR11, PR12, PR13, PR14, PR16, PR17, PR18, PR19, PR20, PR21, PR22, PR23, PR24, PR25, PR26, PR28, PR29, PR30

PR08 (below) emphasised the importance of being transparent about, and learning from, people's mistakes. They explain that we need to reframe the narrative around engagement and create space for learning from our mistakes in a non-judgemental environment: 'let's re-learn how to listen' (PR08).

PR19: I am a strong believer in learning from mistakes, rather than slick videos of "this is how to do it". […] What I'm saying is that... I think we can learn from early mistakes, we can reframe that narrative, let's learn from our mistakes, we're all in it together, let's not be too judgemental. I don't want some sort of corporate video of how to do Zoom meetings... we have to have room for fallibility. We have to be more creative. Let's learn lots of different techniques. Let's use this opportunity of new platforms, comms, to be a little more creative. Let's re-learn how to listen...

Rural journalism

For PR28 (below), learning about others' experiences of conducting engagement was important for those who were working in silos.

PR28: You know, I'm on my own little world here because I just know what I'm involved in. So, there's a lot of really interesting stuff out there, so some examples of what's happening elsewhere, and how successful these approaches were, or not... That would be really useful.

Non-departmental public body

Interviewees suggested that case study examples of others' experiences of engagement – including what went well, what went wrong, and so forth – would be a good way to disseminate key information and promote shared learning. For example, PR10 (below) described what a case study example of engagement could include.

PR10: I'm thinking more along the lines of what could I learn from it, what could I get from it, and what would be the format that would be most helpful? It's probably sort of case study descriptions, you know, saying, "here's a method, this is how normally the method works, and here's how we applied it for this particular research, which tried to find out x worked with this and this, and here's what we learned, here's, here's all the things that went wrong, here's the things that happened to go right".

University

Similarly, PR25 (below) highlighted the benefit of having tangible, real-world examples to learn from others' experiences, as opposed to more abstract ideas.

PR25: I think it's more important for the people doing engagement to know, rather than for me. But I'd say that the more case studies that can be produced, the better. You know, council staff tend to find stories of what other people have done most helpful. In a way, the more abstract principles that are extracted from the case studies can be less helpful than the case studies themselves. So some really good quality case studies that don't try too hard to create rules, but just show what they did, what it involved... I think that would be most helpful to people.

Council

Several interviewees explained that resources for engagement can be too positive, particularly those which are designed by profit-driven organisations. For example, PR22 (below) reflected that some people can be too positive and enthusiastic about digital engagement tools, without considering the potential risks, and how to mitigate them.

PR22: I think if I'm being totally honest, if you're working in any organisation at the moment, from a new business or from a reputation point of view, at the moment, it probably isn't the time to be saying "this didn't work particularly well, or that didn't work particularly well", because I certainly feel, for our industry for the last few months, people have been like, "Oh, we can do this online! We could do this online! We can also do this online! This is amazing online!". In the same way that suppose, people always say, "we had an amazing exhibition", nobody says "actually, guys, bear in mind..." and tells you about the issues.

Consultancy

For PR13 (below), it was important to learn from case studies and examples of how risks had been mitigated in real-world situations. They add that this information would be particularly useful for risk-adverse organisations.

PR13: There's definitely benefit in lessons learnt, like you do something and often you don't tend to reflect on it... Like "that went alright" and it didn't completely crash and burn, so you just carry on for next time... So, if you did have evidence and case studies about it, then I think that would really open doors for councils. You know, seeing "if they did it and it worked, and they're the same level as we are, and they were doing the same thing that we want to do...", I think councils can be quite risk adverse sometimes; we're always quite afraid to take that leap and do something that might seem out of the box to what we normally do, because we'd be worried about it backfiring on us. So having that sort of information that other councils have done it, and it has worked, or where they've had issues and how they've resolved it, then I think this would be really beneficial.

Local authority

PR13 (below) went on to explain that it was important that engagement guidance or resources were not too prescriptive, allowing organisations to adapt the engagement process to different situations and contexts.

PR13: And I guess my only concern with what councils {do}, on a personal level... Sometimes, they can be quite resistant to change, so if you're doing something from a point of view where like "oh, you don't know how we operate, you don't know how this town operates"... Like thinking "oh, that was in a different county, a smaller county, it won't work here". So maybe if you gave information, bite sized, not too generalised but so you could take bits out of it and almost build it up for different councils, so taking one bit for one consultation, then another bit for another one... So maybe giving a few options, and not dictating the way that an engagement should be run, but just making a few suggestions […].

Local authority

For several participants, finding about new and innovative (digital) approaches for engagement would be useful (PR22, PR23, PR30). For example, PR30 felt that it would be 'useful to know about all these other platforms and resources that are out there'. PR23 (below) reflected on the importance of learning about truly innovative, creative, and effective engagement approaches, rather than digital tools which private organisations 'persuade' you to buy. They also comment that they receive a lot of information about 'best practice', therefore, an opportunity to learn from more genuine information and examples would be beneficial. PR23 suggested that one potential method for disseminating this information could be a discussion forum.

PR23: I think, I think sort of best practice or innovation. Actually, maybe innovation, actually, because I think that we get a lot of best practice stuff. I've been participating in a couple of webinars about good practice and digital engagement, and come away each time thinking "Oh, yeah, well, we do that already". But I do come across a lot, because everyone that sells digital projects, from the private sector, is trying to persuade me to buy it. I haven't bought many, but I do get innovative stuff coming through. And I do think "oh, yeah, that sounds really interesting. Let's have a look at that". […] I think what would be really useful is looking at what is really, truly, innovative. I guess what's innovative to one person is maybe not to another. We've done a lot, we've been a lot busier with our engagement, and we have had to work a lot harder than we did previously. And on the way, we've learned some things don't work, and we've dropped them. So, it would be great to have a sort of "Innovation Forum", even, because innovation doesn't stand still at the moment […]. So perhaps a network where people post about innovative techniques and provide evidence. That would be lovely, something I could just dip into every month or so, and think "Oh, yeah, that's an interesting idea, why don't we try that?".

[…] I'm just as interested in stuff that doesn't work, as well as the stuff that does work. So, it'd be great to have somewhere you can be more frank.

Consultancy

The interviewees also suggested numerous tools and media for disseminating information and resources about engagement. This included guidance booklets (PR06, PR16, PR20), podcasts (PR06), infographics (PR06), Wikipedia or other crowdsourced online page (PR17), webinars and training sessions (PR10). For example, PR16 (below) described the usefulness of a booklet or guidelines, particularly for those who were just starting to think about engagement.

PR16: I think a booklet or guidelines would be great. Definitely around the benefits, there are huge numbers around, I mean, the obvious one being people not having to travel, so you can kind of consult or engagement wide groups of people, and it takes them less time to be involved. I think anything like that, would really help.

And particularly, I suppose, if it's aimed at people who are harder to reach. So, you know, particular ethnic minorities, or community groups, or schools' groups, or so on... Maybe not a 'dummies guide' but maybe something about what an online meeting actually is. And so, people aren't surprised when they do want the first time. And then a bit more of a kind of a discussion of why it's valuable to consider it from the host's perspective, and the participants' perspective, I think would be wonderful.

Government department

This section has explored on interviewees' perspectives of what more effective engagement will (or should) look like in the future.

5.12 Conclusion

The key finding in relation to the first research question (RQ1) revealed that the fundamental contextual factors that shape the outcomes of engagement can take on new dimensions in digital and remote environments. The findings revealed a comprehensive range of factors into the challenges and opportunities of digital engagement which are highly complex, interlinked, and context dependent. In almost every situation where a digital tool or approach was used to increase the likelihood of engagement achieving beneficial outcomes (e.g., a more inclusive and/or trustworthy process), there was another situation where these approaches could cause unintended negative consequences on the other hand (e.g., excluding people and/or creating mistrust). The research strongly emphasised that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to engagement and provided a considerable amount of data to support and explain why this is. The findings identified that a flexible, adaptable, and (where possible and appropriate) hybrid approaches (consisting of both digital and in-person methods) should be used to maximise the effectiveness of engagement and deliver its intended goals and benefits. Chapter 7 discusses these findings within the context of the literature, including how the findings contribute to existing models and theories for explaining the outcomes of engagement.

At the end of each interview, practitioners were asked about their views on the utility of this research for their work. Practitioners emphasised the value of learning from others' experiences (e.g., through case studies) including the challenges and risks as well as the opportunities and benefits (therefore providing the opportunity to learn from mistakes). In terms of the medium through which this information could be shared, practitioners suggested a range of approaches including free online booklet, website, Wikipedia page, a podcast, infographics, webinars, training sessions, or a combination of these different materials. Chapter 8 uses these findings to inform the recommendations and dissemination, engagement, and impact plans of this thesis.

Chapter 6: Institutionalising stakeholder engagement

Box 17. Chapter summary – Chapter 6: Institutionalising stakeholder engagement.

- To be successful in the long-term, public and stakeholder engagement must be institutionalised. A stronger evidence base is needed for institutionalising engagement practices.
- The central aim of this chapter is to understand the perspectives of practitioners and practice-enablers in the public, private and third sectors regarding the challenges and opportunities for undertaking best practice engagement within their organisations.
- Rather than focusing on improving participatory processes and best practice generally, this chapter aims to understand why challenges are encountered during attempts to deliver best-practice participatory processes within organisations.
- Specifically, interviewees' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of engagement are captured, providing insights into the organisational barriers and opportunities for institutionalising best practice.
- Key themes were identified from qualitative interviews with engagement practitioners and practice-enablers working in organisations responsible for planning and environmental decision-making in public, private, and third sector organisations in the UK.
- The findings provide insights into the challenges for undertaking best practice engagement, ways they can be overcome, and opportunities for long-term success.
- The findings are relevant for practitioners and practice-enablers (including researchers) in the public, private, and third sectors who aim to involve public and wider stakeholder groups in planning and other environmental decision-making processes. This includes those engaging at the science-policy interface.
- Recommendations are made for building the foundations and successfully embedding a best-practice organisational culture of engagement.

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising best practice engagement in environment and planning organisations. Rather than adding to the existing literature on improving engagement processes and articulating best practice (e.g., what is best practice engagement and how to do it in specific instances), this chapter aims to explore the reasons why difficulties in adopting best practice can be encountered at an organisational level. The findings build on the previous results chapter (Chapter 5) by exploring the dynamics of embedding engagement processes as part of governance and decision-making structures. One key message from Chapter 5 was that there is no 'one size fits all' method or tool which guarantees successful engagement in all situations. As the literature review and the results from Chapter 5 suggested, many of the challenges experienced during engagement processes are rooted in the cultures and structures of the organisations tasked with designing and implementing these processes, as well as wider socio-economic and political dynamics (Baker and Chapin, 2018; Bickerstaff and Walker, 2005; Hoppe, 2011; Reed, 2008; Wesselink *et al.*, 2011). This chapter aims to understand these organisational dynamics and how they impact effective engagement.

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of 24 semi-structured interviews with practitioners and practice-enablers in UK planning and environment organisations. As explained in Chapter 3 (section 3.3.2), this sample consists of 19 interviews from the initial sample which raised common themes regarding organisational barriers and opportunities, and 5 additional interviews that were conducted at a later stage to explore this theme in more depth (so 24 interviewees in total). The interviews were conducted to answer research question two (RQ2): *'What are the challenges for institutionalising engagement and how can they be overcome?'*. Chapter 3 included an overview of how RQ2 was developed (section 3.3.2) and an introduction to the overall interview sample of this thesis (section 3.4.2). The interview participants were involved in engaging public or other stakeholder groups in planning and/or environmental decision-making processes, including work in government departments and agencies, non-departmental public bodies, councils, consultancies, charities, and software companies (see Table 4 in Chapter 3 for a full list of interview participants and their identifiers).

The following sections present themes which explore various organisational challenges and opportunities for engagement that were described by the interview participants. A summary of these themes is illustrated in Figure 21 below, which are explored in more depth in corresponding sections 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, and 6.6. Each section starts with a brief introduction to the themes and a box which contains a summary of the main findings (boxes 18-22). The findings are then brought together in a brief summary in section 6.7.

Figure 21. Summary of the main findings in this chapter: key themes for institutionalising best practice engagement. Source: original diagram by the author.

6.2 Roles and resources

This theme presents the findings which explore interviewees' perceptions of resource availability in their organisation, clarity (or lack of) on roles and responsibilities for engagement, and the impact of this on engagement processes (PR01, PR05, PR06, PR09, PR10, PR13, PR15, PR16, PR22, PR27, PR28, PR29, PR30, PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39). Box 18 provides a summary of the findings presented in this section.

Box 18. Summary of key findings: roles and resources.

This theme draws on interview responses to explore the perceived availability of key resources (e.g. time and funding), the clarity of roles/responsibilities (e.g., of what engagement requires), and the impact of this on engagement.

- The availability of resources within organisations can restrict staff's capacity and capability for carrying out engagement. Limits to resources can include finance (e.g., project funding); time (e.g., decision-making deadlines); human resources (e.g., available staff); skills and expertise (e.g., specialist engagement knowledge).
- Engagement requires different resources in different contexts. It is important to scope resource availability in each situation where engagement is conducted (highlighting the resources that exist, any limitations, and what resources are needed/can be provided).
    - Based on the availability of resources, to is important to be pragmatic and clear about what can be realistically achieved through engagement.
- Challenges can arise when staff are not clear on what engagement is required of them and what this involves. For example, staff can lack an understanding of engagement, becoming confused or even uncomfortable about engaging.
- Improving the clarity of the following factors can help to overcome these challenges including: requirements, targets, and guidance for engagement; definitions for engagement (both across the organisation and for specific teams/projects); understanding of different types of engagement, the differences between them, and the risks/benefits that can be achieved; understanding of different rationales and goals for engagement; whose responsibility it is to engage (both within and between organisations).

6.2.1 Resource availability

The majority of participants (14 out of 24 interviewees[69]) discussed the availability of resources needed for conducting engagement. Limits to resources was raised as a key issue, which included time and financial constraints, as well as lack of adequate human resources (e.g., not having enough staff and/or staff available with the right skills to carry out engagement). This highlights the importance of organisations scoping out available resources, and comparing with resource needs and prioritising accordingly, as well as building staff's capacity (the maximum amount, or potential, that an individual, group, or organisation can achieve or produce something) and capability (the power or ability of an individual, group, or organisation to do something) for carrying out engagement.

For example, PR09 (below) explains how financial constraints can limit what can be achieved through engagement.

PR09:	[…] We're all up for collaborating, and understanding better what that means. But yeah, we don't necessarily have, you know, we don't have sadly, pots of money to fund lots of different research {involving engagement}.

Non-departmental public body

Lack of adequate human resources was also cited as a challenge which can limit engagement. Here, 'human resources' is understood as the availability of staff, particularly those with experience and expertise in engagement. For example, PR16 (below) describes how engagement was only possible due to skilled facilitators. During the pandemic, a lack of staff resources - including those skilled at facilitating - resulted in engagement activities being cancelled. This highlights the importance of having enough available staff with the right skills to carry out engagement (important skills for engagement are explored in more depth in section 6.3).

PR16:	So, we did three rounds of co-design […] but this was really possible because of the great facilitators, who obviously convened everything and handled the technology. You know, they had a big projector, they were the ones that were dialling in, and making sure everyone could hear. So that made it possible. But then we'd done two or three out of six {engagement} webinars planned, and then it was locked down {due to COVID-19) suddenly, and while you'd think that wouldn't make any difference

[69] Participant ID: PR01, PR09, PR10, PR12, PR13, PR16, PR28, PR29; PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39

because it was already online, because of the impact on staff resource we did end up cancelling the rest of the webinars. Which is a shame […].

Government department

Although most participants spoke about the impacts of resource constraints on staff and/or organisational capacity and capability to engage, PR10 (below) also explains how engagement *participants* can also be affected by resource constraints. For example, financial and other resource constraints can impact participants' ability to fully engage. This raises the question – is it responsible, fair, and inclusive to expect participants to engage if they have limited resources to do so? Should participants be compensated for their time and/or provided with the resources they need to engage?

PR10: And I've actually put in a proposal to do participatory mapping, landscape mapping, so that wouldn't be just {engaging} farmers, but a whole range of different land managers and residents or visitors. […] But it does require, well, good technology, good data, good broadband, and some sort of technological literacy for people to use it. […] Well, you know, {participants} trying to get their head around this software, that was yet another barrier. So really, you do need a specific type of participant to manage all of that, you know, is it fair to expect all of that without renumeration? Or with limited resources?

University

PR29 (below) highlights the importance of being realistic about the availability of funds and other resources when conducting engagement. Although using a variety of tools and techniques is important for engaging with diverse participants, PR29 reflects that resource availability can impact what is used.

PR29: {Regarding the best methods for engagement} […] If we're ignoring cost aspects, because obviously that can be a barrier, you know, I recommend that you should use as many communication channels as possible {for engagement}, but you know, it's naïve to think that, because some don't have the funds and resources.

University

Expanding on this issue in more depth, PR28 (below) describes how there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to engagement; any approach must be matched to the purpose, context, and resource availability. For example, costs and other resources can impact who can be engaged with (and when). It's important to remember that different engagement approaches can require different resources, so an engagement process should involve scoping the resource availability of the team or organisation carrying out the engagement process.

PR28: {The best engagement approach} is really difficult to pin down, particularly because it depends on the context of each project. […] And yes, cost is a factor, it's always expensive to engage with people in the traditional way. A whole range of factors. But I don't think there's one solution – it's mixed methods, mixed scales, mixed contexts, mixed budgets…

[…] I think just recognising that there is some difficulty engaging with some groups. […] We had a training day where people could drop in and ask questions, which was useful. But this was really resource intensive. I still think there's a big job to be done to get all the different groups engaged.

Non-departmental public body

Underestimating the importance of resource availability can be a risk to successful engagement. For example, PR01 (below) feels that important skills and knowledge for engagement (such as the ability to communicate to different audiences) can be undervalued and underestimated in project resources. It's important to scope what resources are important, what resources currently exist, and what resources are needed, to help promote good practice engagement.

PR01: […] You realise that not everybody's the same, and actually, you need to address the way you engage to different audiences. And I think there's too much of a sort of standard "tick box" approach without actually looking at how do you engage with hard-to-reach groups. I mean, if you look at the Welsh Government, the Wellbeing and Future Generations Act is all about involvement, collaboration... And unless actually, people change the way they work, you're never gonna end up with that collaboration. […] And when you just talk to the project managers, they're so full of technical language, but actually how do you simplify that out for anybody's to get engaged, then understand it, and then want to respond. So yeah, it's a challenge, and I think it's something that's maybe underestimated in project resources. […] I think it is undervalued as actually really important for projects, if you're talking about engagement.

Consultancy

The next section is about the perceived clarity of staff's roles and responsibilities for engagement.

6.2.2 Clarity on roles and responsibilities

The significance of clarity on organisational roles and responsibilities for carrying out engagement emerged as a theme (PR36, PR37, PR38). Interviewees highlighted the importance of staff being clear on what engagement is required of them and what this involves (PR37, PR38). Building on the issues relating to resource availability discussed in the previous section (e.g., time and money), PR37 (below) describes the importance of staff having clear requirements and guidance around different approaches to engagement. For PR37, this not only helped to decrease uncertainty around engagement (e.g., what to do and how to do it), but also can reduce staff nervousness in engaging (see section 6.3.1).

PR37: The main things have been time, people don't have time to think about it, and we don't have enough resources. […] People really want to be commissioned to do this work, so they want to be told to do it, so rather than having an underlying theme of “You must be inclusive in everything you do” [...] - and it's hard to translate what that really means - they wanted something a bit more concrete, which is happening this year, you know, we've got some clearer requirements and targets.

[…] People {also} don't really understand how to start a conversation about inclusion, so when we say, “we want you to be more inclusive […]”, they're like “well, what do you mean? How do I talk about race, how do I talk about ethnicity, how do I talk about disability, I feel uncomfortable talking about this and even broaching the subject, so I'm probably going to avoid it because it's too difficult”. So, there's something there about how to start conversation {and} what language is appropriate to use. So yeah, there's a lot of things that people are unsure about... [...] Well actually, yeah, some people are just afraid to have that initial conversation, because they're worried that they might say something wrong.

Non-departmental public body

PR37 goes on to reflect that having clear definitions of engagement is essential for understanding what is required for carrying out engagement processes. Any process to embed engagement must start with clear definitions on what engagement is – clear definitions and understandings around engagement are central to the issues discussed in this chapter (for example, the importance of clarity and increased understanding of engagement is linked to all themes and discussed in this chapter).

PR37: We don't have a standard definition of inclusion, […]. We haven't actually, interestingly, no we haven't sort of said 'this is inclusion'. We've, we've talked about in a general sense, but we haven't actually put a definition in those sessions. We've just talking about what being more inclusive means and, you know... I don't know, actually, we've never kind of said 'inclusion is this'. I think it's more implied. I don't know, should we have done that…

Non-departmental public body

PR38 (below) describes the importance of being clear on different types of engagement (and the difference between them), as well as what is required of staff. PR38 mentions that better guidance on engagement could improve organisational and staff clarity around engagement, which introduces a theme that is discussed in more depth later in the chapter (see sections 6.3.3 and 6.6). While clarity and guidance on engagement (e.g., what it means, what is required, how to do it, what the benefits and risks are, etc.) is essential, staff also need to be clear on who's responsibility it is to engage. For example, in the quote below PR38 describes how there can be confusion around the type of engagement that is within the organisation's remit (i.e., whether engagement is their organisation's responsibility, or the responsibility of an external organisation). Other participants also raised the issue of a lack of clarity amongst external stakeholders around what the organisation's role and responsibly is, which can lead to misunderstandings and conflict (see section 6.4.1).

PR38: We're really keen to have a dedicated chapter {guidance} […] around stakeholder engagement to really put the focus on the importance of that {engagement} as a part of these projects, because again, I think in the past it's been much more about consultation, which is very different. […] Consultation is very different to me, that's going along and saying: "This is our idea, tell us your thoughts about it", it's not going along and saying, "Right, you know, we've got an idea, but we'd like to develop it with you". And I wonder whether that's not clear in the organisation, the difference between proper engagement and consultation, I think they get a bit blurred.

PR38: […] I do think {clarity and guidance around definitions and types of engagement} would be really helpful. And I suppose, we have to be quite careful as well about the way we use the term consultation. You know, because in some of our work, it's very clearly {government department's} role to do public consultation, not is not our role. So, you know, I think some sort of explanation would be really helpful for people, for sure. And yeah, definitely setting out the differences, and the benefits of those approaches as well. You know because they both have their place. But I just I think sometimes people think they're doing engagement but what they're really doing is consultation, if that makes sense.

Interviewer: So just being a bit clear not only about the differences between different types of engagement, but also about whose responsibility it is?

PR38: I think so. I mean, because, you know, we can consult in {organisation}, but I think it's just on particular projects it's not within our remit. If it's to do a government policy decision, then it's not {the organisation's} role to do the consultation, that's for {the government department} to do. But you know, I suppose we consult in a more informal way, don't we, on our projects, and that's still a valid thing to do.

Non-departmental public body

This section has explored interviewees' perceptions of resource availability, the clarity of different roles and responsibilities, and the impact of this on engagement. The next section explores interviewees' confidence in their skillset for carrying out engagement.

6.3 Skills and confidence

This theme includes participants' perspectives on their skillset for conducting best practice engagement, as well as their confidence (or lack of) for conducting engagement. Interviewees (15 out of 24 interviewees[70]) discussed related diverse challenges and opportunities. This included their comfort zone for conducting engagement, nervousness around engaging, as well as useful skills which can be developed to help mitigate issues and promote best practice. See Box 19 for a summary of the findings presented in this section.

The results in this section suggest that organisations have an important role in managing the confidence of their staff members. One way that this can be done is through investing in the development in key skills for engaging. At the same time, there are lots of ways that organisations can undermine staff's confidence in engaging. This can make staff feel nervous or even fearful about engaging, particularly if they feel that they are not being adequately supported by the organisation. One key challenge was staff feeling nervous about delivering information about contentious projects, and managing conflict with stakeholders, particularly when they feel that that the right skills/support is not provided by their organisation (linking with many of the issues which are explored in the remaining sections in this chapter).

As explored in the following sections, building staff's confidence in their skillset for engaging is central to mitigating these risks, highlighting important considerations for training and support. One way that this can be achieved is by investing in the development of both technical skills (e.g., engagement guidance and expertise) and non-technical skills (e.g., people skills like communication, emotional intelligence, conflict management, and dispute resolution). Although definitions can be subjective and changing across or within organisations, technical

[70] Participant ID: PR01, PR05, PR06, PR09, PR13, PR16, PR22, PR27, PR30, PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39

skills can be understood as the practical knowledge and ability to perform specific tasks, such as scientific research or best practice engagement techniques. Non-technical skills can include people skills (also known as soft skills, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal intelligence) such as communication, empathy, listening, leadership, facilitation, mediation, and conflict management.

Box 19. Summary of key findings: skills and confidence.

This section draws on interview responses to explore levels of confidence in the skillset for carrying out engagement, why this is, and the impact on engagement.

- Organisations can play a role in undermining and/or developing staff's skills and confidence in engaging.
- Staff described being nervous, or even fearful, of engaging in some situations.
    - Contributing factors included the perceived risk of conflict with stakeholders, legal implications of engagement, repercussions from not being 'on message' (e.g., organisational and policy agendas), and/or a lack of agency for conducting engagement (e.g., that the organisation does not trust staff to engage).
- It is important that staff feel they are supported to develop their skillset for engaging, which can help increase their confidence in engaging.
- Key skills for carrying out engagement were recognised as being distinct from the technical skills required in some areas of work.
    - The lack of focus on people skills (or "soft skills") was recognised as an issue for carrying out engagement.
    - As well as so-called technical skills, people skills (such as communication, listening, leadership, and empathy) were recognised as fundamental to successful engagement.
    - It is important to invest in the development of both technical and people skills for engagement.
    - Valuing social science approaches were considered important for incorporating diverse skills and knowledge types in organisations.
- Training is important for improving staff's skills and confidence in engagement.
    - Targeted training should be provided to develop the key skills required for engagement, including people skills.
    - The scope of existing skills and expertise should be examined across the organisation, highlighting gaps, and upskilling where necessary.
    - Training should be supported by a dedicated member of staff (or team) who specialises in engagement.

6.3.1 Nervousness and fear

This section includes some examples of the different reasons why staff can be apprehensive about engaging (9 out of 24 interviewees[71]). Staff members expressed a lack of confidence, nervousness, and/or fear of engaging in some contexts (particularly if engaging around a difficult or contentious project). This is linked to issues discussed in other sections in this chapter such as the risk of damaging stakeholder relationships and eroding trust (section 6.4.1), agency of the engager and controls on communications (section 6.5).

In the quote below, PR06 describes the difficulty they experienced when communicating and managing stakeholder expectations in relation to flood management, reflecting that people can be too scared to undertake engagement due to the perceived risk of legal implications.

PR06: […] I just need someone to come and help to facilitate and know what's what. Because, I think, the way we are in this country, there's so many things that {mean} people are just too scared to do anything just in case there are any legal implications. So, flooding is a prime example, {because} you need certain licenses to do certain things, whether it's from the local flood authority, or from the Environment Agency {EA}… […] All you need is someone to go in and say "Look, this is a minor water body, so you could do this, under this EA license, and to get that, you just need to do this…" and "it takes five minutes, and now you guys can go and build a dam".

Charity/not-for-profit

PR13 mentions the risk of privacy and security concerns, which could undermine staff member's confidence in engaging. From the organisation's point of view, a breach to GDPR regulations during an engagement process (e.g., disclosing participants personal information such as names, contact details, locations, etc.) could have severe impacts on their reputation. They note that there is a team within their organisation which is responsible for providing advice and support on data protection during engagement processes, which is essential for giving staff the confidence that things will not "go wrong" during engagement.

PR13: […] Yeah, it's a tricky situation. It's one of the things that we're always worried about, obviously, as local government and council… Serving the public, the worst thing you can have is a GDPR breach. From a reputation point of view, that would be horrific for us. So, every precaution we can take to safeguard people's personal details, we do take… […] There are probably more levels to it, but we have a specific team in {the organisation} who advise us on stuff for digital consultations. I'm sure we would speak to them first, and I'm sure they'd come up with a million and

[71] Participant ID: PR06, PR13, PR30, PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39

one things we'd have to do, and I'm sure it would cause some headaches, but we just can't take the risk of it going wrong.

Local authority

Interview participants provided further details around the fears staff have which can undermine their confidence to engage. In the quotes below, PR36 describes some legal fears which are inherent to engagement processes. They describe the litigation and procedures around statutory consultation as a "minefield" which must be navigated by staff, relying upon the rules prescribed by law. In this situation, there are strict rules around what can and cannot be done when engaging with stakeholders through statutory consultation, with potentially dire repercussions if something goes wrong (e.g., if a procedure does not happen as prescribed by law, it could cause further costly and time-consuming legal proceedings). As a result, PR36 reflects that people tend to say that they are not running an 'official' consultation, to avoid the legal requirements that would ensue. Speculatively, the risk of 'things going wrong' under legal guidelines (which could risk judicial review) could contribute to the apprehension towards engagement which was felt by some members of staff.

PR36: Consultation is a target rich area for litigation because it is procedural; one screw up in that procedure, and there is your challenge. So, what tends to happen is, people say that 'this is not an official consultation, we are just listening to your views'. So, with stakeholder engagement, we want to engage with them, but we don't want to make it appear like we are dealing with them as consultees, because then all the case law applies. It is a minefield. So we try and engage with them in a way that does not link to case law.

Non-departmental public body

Nervousness to engage is also linked to staff and organisational agency to engage (see section 6.5). Participants also spoke about a 'nervousness about people being "on message"' (PR39), a nervousness that comes from being close to government and policy agendas e.g., when the organisation is 'not really independent' (PR39), and a nervousness from those both within and outside of the organisation which can restrict the ability of staff to 'understand stakeholder views' (PR38). The supporting data behind these quotes is discussed in sections 6.5.1 and 6.5.2, illustrating how factors that contribute to staff's nervousness and lack of confidence can be linked to restrictions on their agency to engage (for example, in some situations staff were even told not to engage by their organisation). This can contribute to staff feeling a lack of confidence in their engagement skillset, that they are not supported by the organisation to engage (in particular ways, or even at all), or that they are not provided with the opportunity to develop the skillset needed to engage (or a combination of these factors).

For example, PR39 (below) describes a sense of anxiety around communicating and getting the message ‘right’, particularly via social media when the message is broadcasted rapidly to large audience. This links to restrictions on staff’s agency for carrying out engagement (6.5), including controls around messaging and specific issues for communicating via online communications.

PR39:	I guess it’s all to do with social media and all these other things, there’s much more worry about messaging and getting it right. Perhaps because of social media, they feel everything anyone says can be broadcasted to everyone immediately, whereas in the old days it was much more difficult because there weren’t those means to do that. I don’t know, it just seems there’s a lot more […] concern about what we might say […].

Non-departmental public body

The next section explores the importance of developing skills to enhance confidence in engaging.

6.3.2 Developing key skills

The importance of ensuring staff confidence in engagement, and reducing nervousness around engaging, was highlighted in 6.3.1. This section presents findings which suggest that one way of doing this is for organisations to support the development of key skills such as communication, facilitation, and leadership. The next section (6.3.3) explores the importance of training and dedicated roles for improving key engagement skills.

Some interviewees highlighted skills that they felt were key for building confidence in engaging (6 out of 24 interviewees[72]). These participants all highlighted the importance of investing in the development of both technical and non-technical skills (see definition on page 25). For example, interviewees emphasised the importance of people skills (or “soft skills”) for improving staff’s confidence for carrying out engagement (PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39). Some important people skills for engagement are summarised by PR36 below:

PR36:	From my perspective I think we need to really invest in those soft skills. Communication, emotional intelligence, conflict management, dispute resolution. I really do think we need to do that. And we have to, have to, have to, engage in our communication skills.

Non-departmental public body

[72] Participant ID: PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39

Several participants spoke about a lack of focus on soft skills in their organisation (PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39). PR38 (below) highlights this, emphasising the need for developing a balance of technical and non-technical (“soft”) skills in organisations. This quote also highlights potential issues regarding the use of terminology: labelling skills as “soft” and “technical” can risk deemphasising the fundamental importance (and technical nature) of “soft” skills like communication, for example.

PR38: I think so, and you know, one of the things I flagged with {a senior person in the organisation} is, when we were talking about that work that he's developing, which is focused around our sort of regulatory role, but I'm assuming the principles actually will apply, the broad principles will apply wherever you are in the organisation, or whatever you do...

One of the things that really concerns me is a bit of a lack of focus on some of the soft skills that you need. It's all very much about the technical side of things, which is really important, but I sort of think that the soft skills should have equal weighting. And, you know, that is very much I think... People think about {soft skills} as a bit of a nice thing to do, but actually it's fundamental to what we do.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, that's, that makes sense. Yeah, soft skills isn't a good term is it, it can get dismissed a little bit, because it doesn't seem as important.

PR38: Yeah, you're quite right, it is a technical skill, actually, because there is a lot of expertise in knowing how to facilitate a conversation and listening. So yeah, you're right, that {the terminology} doesn't help, does it?

Non-departmental public body

Similarly, PR36 spoke about the issue of some decision-making processes placing too much value on technical and specialist views, which could be at the expense of valuing non-technical information. In this example, the feedback was that non-technical views were listened to by those leading the engagement, however they did not necessarily know how to incorporate these views into the final decision (as they did not speak in the same “technical” language). PR36 reflects on the importance of having guidance and recommendations around including different types of information in engagement processes (which links with some of the issues discussed around guidance and forward planning in section 6.6).

PR36: […] And they interviewed people who have participated in these inquiries, asked them what their impressions were, and their feedback was, yeah, basically this {engagement) process does not respect views which are not technical and jargon-led, basically. If you speak that language, the planning inspectorate will listen to what you have to say, if you don't, it will listen to what you say, but has no idea what to do with it. And people don't participate in it, because they don't get it. You know, they might feel strongly about it, but they don't feel part of the process, that's what they were saying. And they came up with a bunch of recommendations on how you might address that.

Non-departmental public body

PR36 (below) highlights several interlinked issues. Firstly, they explain how a lack of resources to conduct engagement may have resulted in staff not being able to meet with stakeholders in the way they expected (linking to sections 6.2 and 6.4), which may lead to conflict with stakeholders (linking with 6.4.1). Secondly, PR36 emphasises the importance of clearly communicating information to stakeholders in an accessible manner, as well as staff being present to answer questions and provide support. Finally, it is also important that the stakeholder is able to understand technical information and advice. This emphasises the importance of creating spaces for listening and ensuring mutual understanding during the engagement process.

PR36: We've just had a stakeholder feedback session […]. And the two main things from that is, one, "Why the hell didn't you turn up to our hearings anymore, we miss you. We need you there". And we just don't turn up to them because we don't have the resources to do that. And because of that, they are very, very, cross with us that we're not there to answer their questions […]. But the second thing they said was, "We don't know half the time what your problem is, we don't understand". […] You know, we need to be very clear when we communicate with people, what our concerns are and why, and do that in a way that actually resonates and lands. We're not interested in landing something, we're interested in getting it technically correct, and that's our problem.

Non-departmental public body

The findings suggest that any strategy to develop soft skills must be pragmatically adapted to the variety of roles and responsibilities across the organisation (e.g. for different parts of the organisation). For example, different knowledge and skills will be required for a statutory consultation process with legal considerations, compared to a project which aims to co-produce decisions with local stakeholders over a long period of time. Different engagement situations will also involve different stakeholder relationships, for example while some projects may be engaging with new stakeholders, others will be engaging with stakeholders who already have a relationship with (and perception of) the organisation. It is crucial that support is provided to staff no matter what situation they are in. For example, as PR37 highlights below, it is also essential to provide clear and accessible information and guidance to not risk overwhelming or confusing staff. This is particularly important when staff are working under time and resource constraints (or to strict legal procedures), as they may not have the time to trawl through lengthy documentation – training and skills development needs to be succinct and targeted to specific contexts. Ideally, as highlighted in the previous section, this would also be supported by a member of staff in a dedicated supporting role.

PR37: I think we have to look really, really carefully about what we really need them {staff} to learn and to be […] comfortable with and confident in. […] I think when it comes to their particular role, […] we just need to make sure they've got the soft skills required to be able to talk to people, to be able to empathise, and all that kind of thing.

Non-departmental public body

PR38: (below) describes the realities of building capacity for engagement in the organisation and providing the soft skills staff need to improve their self-confidence, while promoting trusting relationships with stakeholders. Based on their experiences, they suggest that staff are 'out of practice' in some important areas of engagement. PR38 speculated that there may be a residual impact from instances in the past where it was implied that staff shouldn't engage in particular situations (linking to section 6.5). They reflect that staff being told not to do engagement in the past could contribute to a lack of experience and nervousness of engaging.

PR38: […] It's about how you build the capability, isn't it, in the organisation, and give people the tools they need and the confidence, and all the rest of it. And that's quite an undertaking, isn't it, because, you know, we did have all of that, those skills and experience, a while ago, but yeah… we lost it, I think.

Interviewer: Where do you think that lack of confidence comes from?

PR38: I do think people are out of practice, I think, partly. You just don't get a lot of opportunity to speak to stakeholders. So, I guess that a lot of our interaction with the outside world […] would probably be the customer, transactional, type of work. So that's not true engagement where you're seeking ideas, and you might need to facilitate a group conversation, or some other sort of approach to get views. I think, as well, that stems from {instances in the past where staff} are told that they shouldn't do it {engagement}, probably, as well. I don't think that's helpful.

Non-departmental public body

Other interviewees emphasised the importance of valuing social science approaches, particularly for incorporating diverse skills and knowledge types in the organisation (PR38, PR37). In the quote below, PR38 highlights a related issue regarding the importance of valuing and embedding social science approaches in the organisation. This interview participant views social science as valuable in helping engagement processes to work with and value different types of knowledge (e.g., local knowledge). PR38 described how social science approaches can help staff members to identify these knowledges, appreciate their value for decision-making, and give them the confidence and the skills to incorporate this in best practice engagement strategy. PR38 feels that their organisation can struggle to identify diverse types of knowledge and/or how to incorporate them in their in decision-making processes.

PR38: […] You know, we've got a really robust experimental study, and then another study which is still quite robust, but it was sort of more opportunistic {data} and based on a real-life situation. So perhaps didn't have the same level of controls or design that had gone into it. But I was thinking they're both really equally valid. Yet, a lot of people have a particular view about, you know, more anecdotal evidence, or more sort of in practice evidence, if you like. […] I think it comes down to setting out the benefits really clearly for people so they understand why, actually why local knowledge, and local engagement, is a really important factor.

[…] It's a big debate in social science. You know, this idea of how do you integrate different types of knowledge in a sector, or indeed society, but also specifically a sector that's been built around natural science, in terms of metrics, and the way we think about things, and the questions we ask. So yeah, […] it's something that we have to keep thinking about, and struggling with as a natural science-based organisation really, and recognising sometimes it can be even really hard to actually even identify those knowledges, let alone what to do with them.

Non-departmental public body

Similarly, PR37 (below) talks about a growing awareness of the importance of social science in their organisation, which predominantly employs people with more physical science specialisms. PR37 feels that more people in their organisation are appreciating the inherent value of social sciences for achieving the environmental goals of their organisation. Although they reflect that there might be some resistant to change around social science-led practices, most staff members would be willing to embrace new approaches and knowledge types. This is because they feel that the majority of people in their organisation can appreciate how social sciences fit with the organisational aims and objectives for protecting the environment.

PR37: I think people are beginning to understand the importance of the social science aspect, and yes the bulk of our scientists are all very much focused on {specific topics}, you know, those things rather than the people side of things, but I think people are starting to understand that if we don't have an understanding of the population, and how we can influence people, […] basically if we can't influence people, then we can't influence them to act {for} the environment. So, I think people are starting to understand how important it is to get people {specific activity}, to then help us to achieve our goals and to, you know, encourage them to have to take ownership of the environment and to care for it […] We {as an organisation} find it hard to go wider, and this is where we really need to make a difference now.

Non-departmental public body

As the data in this section shows, the interviewees felt that it was important to scope existing skills for engagement, highlight any gaps and/or areas where staff lack confidence, and provide support accordingly. One key part of this was organisations investing in the development of people skills (or "soft skills") – such as verbal communication, active listening, empathy, conflict management, and conflict resolution – and providing adequate training/support, and opportunity to engage, to develop these skills.

6.3.3 Training and support

This section briefly explores the importance of organisations providing adequate training and support for improving staff's skills and confidence in engagement. This can include appointing specialist members of staff to support engagement across the organisation. Although this was only mentioned by several participants (PR36, PR37, PR38), it remains an important area of enquiry and offers some interesting points to consider. Relevant findings on skills, training, and support with regards to digital engagement are included in Chapter 5 (section 5.5).

The interviewees spoke about the need for organisations to provide training for staff in the key skills that are required for engagement. This should include providing high quality training for the skills highlighted in section 6.3.2. For PR38 (below), some aspects of training were lacking in their organisation, and it was important to explore different approaches to training staff in the key skills needed for engagement. They describe how creative techniques, like storytelling, can help staff members develop their skills and knowledge for engaging with stakeholders. PR38 reflects that staff being trained and supported to have the "creativity to inspire people" through stakeholder engagement is something that their organisation is currently lacking.

PR38: One of the things as well, it is sort of related to engagement […]. But one of the things I really wanted to try and explore, in terms of getting our staff a bit more engaged in building their confidence and sharing knowledge, was using sort of more different approaches. So rather than just sort of, you know, your typical training course or webinar, which I think has limited... Well, it does have value but, you know, I just think we need to maybe explore some different ways of doing things. But one of the things I really wanted to look at was how we can use knowledge sharing techniques through storytelling. And I think that could be quite powerful in terms of helping people develop their skills and knowledge around engagement, because you learn so much more, I think, through a story than you do through a training course, if that makes sense.

PR38: […] I think case stories are really helpful to illustrate a real-life situation, but I think I was thinking about more of a technique for training. […] There are all kinds of interesting techniques like that that I think we could make a lot better use of, and start to explore.

Interviewer: Great, so ways of disseminating the information creatively rather than your standard "here's a webinar" training?

PR38: Yeah absolutely. And my reason for saying that is because I wanted to try it internally, because I thought actually those sorts of techniques, we could be using really well with some of our stakeholders or, you know, external people. But yeah, you're right, it is the creativity to inspire people, isn't it, that we're sometimes lacking.

Non-departmental public body

For example, PR36 (below) describes a lack of specialist engagement knowledge and training within their team. In this situation, engagement isn't necessarily the responsibility of staff within their team – their role is to work with stakeholders to provide legal advice, for example on external communications (e.g., emails, blogs, website information, and other correspondence with stakeholders). This links to comments made by PR36 and others in the previous section, for example, on the need to invest in the development of soft skills and not just focusing on the technical skills/elements of their work.

PR36: So, do we have someone {trained} on the team who does that {engagement}? No, we know we don't. The way that our team operates is, there's a problem, one of us will help, you know, there's a problem with the legal dimension to it. One of us will be allocated to work on that case. And then we work with the team working on it. Usually with [...] an area manager for example. And […] we will either take over the correspondence with the solicitors on the other side, we'll write those letters, or we will advise on that on emails that they're sending out to people, or will advise on blogs... […] Or we will advise on communications lines, how to word things in a way which isn't legally correct.

Non-departmental public body

Other interviewees in the sample felt that training was needed to provide staff with the specialist skills required for engagement (e.g., the skills highlighted in section 6.3.2). For example, PR37 (below) highlights the requirement for people who are “naturally very good at engaging” to support teams across their organisation. PR37 reflects that this would involve upskilling current staff in the organisation, which would require a lot of targeted training.

PR37: So, the people {staff} that we that we get to do the inclusion role, they've got to be, you know, people who are very naturally good at engaging, I guess. The idea is that they will be the conduit between the projects, making sure that people are linked up. […] I think it's going to be recruiting internally […] So our pool of people that we might be able to draw on might be quite limited. So yeah, there probably will be quite a lot of training required, I would think.

Non-departmental public body

Building on the above points, the quotes in the rest of this section (also from PR37) delve into the importance of having staff in specialist roles to support engagement across the organisation, and what this might look like.

For example, PR37 (below) describes how the organisational need was identified for a senior member of staff to be embedded in each team across the organisation to support engagement processes. For example, they would work to connect people across different projects, signpost expertise and resources (including training opportunities), and guide them through the process of whatever they are trying to do. The person in this supporting role would help to sure that best practice engagement is embedded at a strategic level as well as on-the-ground, ensuring that staff are considering the available best practice guidance in their work and that all decisions are adequately justified within the engagement process. As PR37 describes below, specialist engagement roles can be crucial or embedding best practices. If these roles were introduced successfully, then this could reduce the risk that staff ‘don’t know where to start’ with engagement, become confused about their role, and/or struggle to access key resources to enable them to carry out best practice engagement.

PR37: One of the key things is that we’ve got some resources this year to […] bring into the {different parts of the organisation}, on person at a Senior Level, that will be their […] inclusion lead. So, what that will do is […] if somebody is doing a project and they’re like ‘Oh, where do I start with this inclusion stuff?’ and that person will go ‘Right, okay, you can do this, you can do this, you can talk to this person’…

So, part of their role will be to actually make connections with different groups […], people who we wouldn’t normally engage with. […] And so, giving {us} the ability to shift our focus a little bit, and just to have somebody actually dedicated to working on it, which reinforces our intent that {inclusion work} isn't going to go away, that we're really serious about it. And it will mean that people will have somebody to go to for advice, as well.

PR37: […] What I'm hoping is that, with the {specialist engagement} person embedded in each team, they'd be the go-to person to ask about {what to do}. So then, people have less excuse to sit there and go 'I don't know what to do', because somebody will actually be there to help them, and support them to do their projects, or whatever they're trying to do.

Non-departmental public body

This section has explored interviewees' confidence in their skillset for carrying out engagement, why this is, and the impact on engagement. The next section explores perceptions and experiences of organisations and/or staff effectively managing participant expectations of engagement.

6.4 Managing expectations

This theme is about organisations and engagers (i.e., those responsible for engaging and carrying out the process) managing (or not managing) participant expectations of the engagement process and its outcomes. See Box 20 for a summary of the findings presented in this section.

The majority of interview participants reflected on the importance and dynamics of managing expectations during the engagement process (17 out of 24 interviewees[73]). These issues build on the findings presented in the previous sections of this chapter, which have demonstrated the sheer complexity of engagement processes. There are numerous issues, barriers, and constraints which can impact engagement processes. This can make it more (or less) likely that engagement will be successful and effective, and for whom. It is rare that the engagement process is starting from a blank slate. Public and stakeholder participants can have preconceptions of the organisation and/or members of staff/engagers. For example, negative preconceptions can be formed due to concerns about the project and its impacts, past experiences and interactions, low trust in the organisation (and/or what they represent), suspicion about the organisation's motives or creditability, and so forth.

[73] Participant ID: PR06, PR07, PR13, PR16, PR18, PR21, PR22, PR23, PR27, PR29, PR30; PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39

Box 20. Summary of key findings: managing expectations.

This section draws on interview responses to explore perceptions of organisations and staff effectively managing (or not managing) participants' expectations of the engagement process and its outcomes.

- Engagement processes rarely start from a blank slate; members of the public and other stakeholders often have pre-conceived views of the organisation and/or staff carrying out the engagement.
- Stakeholders can form negative expectations of the engagement process. This can be due to the nature of the relationship between participants and the organisation, previous encounters with staff, and so forth.
  - Stakeholder opposition and conflict is complex and can be difficult for staff to manage during the engagement process.
  - It is important that engagers (e.g., staff) are respectful and supportive of stakeholder concerns, trying to incorporate their views in decision-making while being realistic that the outcome may not satisfy all parties.
- Stakeholder opposition can be considered inevitable for some projects and decision-making processes (e.g., large infrastructural developments).
  - This can be due to stakeholders having pre-conceived ideas about the organisation and what they do.
  - Highly vocal opposition amongst stakeholders was considered to be a risk to the representativeness of the engagement process.
  - Some systems for decision-making are poorly designed and/or carried out, which makes opposition more likely.
- Stakeholders can be perceived as having high, unrealistic, or very specific expectations of the engagement and decision-making process.
  - Issues can arise if the engagement process does not happen as expected. This can be due to limits on organisational capacity and capability to engage, such as resource constraints.
  - If expectations are not carefully managed and supported, then this can erode trust and have a long-term negative impact on staff/organisational relationships with stakeholders.
- It is important for those responsible for engaging to be realistic up-front about what can be realistically achieved through the engagement process.
  - This includes being clear and transparent about what is on/off the table in terms of who can be involved, what is discussed, the extent to which an outcome/decision can be influenced, and so forth.
  - It is important for engaging staff and organisations to be clear about what is within (and outside of) their remit. This can include explaining how their engagement and decision-making processes work, any potential limitations, and clarifying different roles/responsibilities.

6.4.1 Opposition and conflict

Members of the public and other stakeholders may have negative prior expectations of the engagement process (11 out of 24 interviewees[74]). These pre-conceptions can derive from the nature of the relationship between participants and the organisation, or from previous encounters with particular staff members, and so forth.

For example, PR23 (below) emphasises the importance of being clear and transparent up front (i.e., at the start of the engagement process) about the extent to which participants can have a say in the decision-making outcomes. In this situation, they explain that engagement participants can only influence certain aspects of the project (housing development), rather than the project itself – in other words, the project was going to go ahead regardless of the public's views, however, specific elements could be altered. Although this issue is described in the specific situation of housing development, PR23 makes a more fundamental point about the importance of being clear about what is 'on the table' in engagement and decision-making. It is critical to manage people's expectations of the engagement process from the outset. However, as PR23 reflects, it can be difficult to communicate these limitations to engagement to stakeholders

PR23: I think that the truth is, and this is where I'm just being frank about this, but the imperative to build lots of homes does often collide with residents [residents' views, obtained via engagement], who feel very strongly {about housing development}. The density {of housing} that we typically propose for just the development phase, there's quite a lot of resistance. I think this is partly because of green space, and a lot of the time due to cars and traffic… And frankly, I struggle with some of that. There is some genuine stuff [concerns raised during engagement] about density and the type of housing, and we do try and respond to those types of things. But high density is the function of the need to develop lots of homes, lots of good quality homes, and very quickly.

Consultancy

In the quote below, PR23 acknowledges that stakeholder opposition can be due to a variety of complex reasons (such as resistance to change, as well as wider social and economic concerns), which can be difficult for staff to manage and incorporate into decision-making.

PR23: There's an element of NIMBYism, although I do recognise that it's much more constructive than that. There's a lot of resistance to change, resistance to losing open space, even if it's not good quality. And there's

[74] Participant ID: PR13, PR18, PR23, PR27, PR29; PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39

very real concerns, usually about the impact on social infrastructure, schools, and GP surgeries and so on are often cited... Impacts on traffic and transport networks, particularly parking […].

Consultancy

As PR13 (below) explains in the quote below, there are sometimes unavoidable constraints on what can be realistically achieved during the engagement process (e.g., how much stakeholders can influence project outcomes). For example, there can be an inevitable opposition towards some projects, which can be accentuated by a lack of understanding amongst stakeholders of the key priorities for the project to achieve. These situations can lead to an increased likelihood of anger, frustration, or even aggression. PR13 reflects on the importance of managing clear and realistic expectations with stakeholders.

PR13: We've had certain issues with certain districts in {the county} at the moment, who have basically turned around to the government - who obviously have housing targets - and said "we don't want any more housing" but we'll take the infrastructure instead. And it's kind of like those two are linked, because a lot of the time the money for the infrastructure comes from the housing, so we can't separate them. So naturally, if you hold an event in those locations, you quite often get quite a lot of aggro. So while you're building his business structure, which will facilitate houses, and so you're just going like, make sure there's more houses built on that area, and that's not what we want... So it does get quite aggressive. And you kind of have to go "well, this is why we're doing it, we're trying to do it so the road is currently at capacity, or future predictions for growth in the area, and future development will bring that road to a standstill, so what we're trying to do now is build that capacity up now, and if we don't then it will get worse in the future", so we try and talk then round that way.

Local authority

PR13 (below) expands on the above quote by explaining how they manage expectations with stakeholders, particularly when they are wholly opposed to a project. It is important for organisations to demonstrate that stakeholder views have been listened to, and acted upon, in an open and transparent way. Although PR13 reflects that it is not always going to be possible to act upon everyone’s views, it’s important to demonstrate that they have been listened to. PR13 emphasises the importance of being respectful and supportive of stakeholder’s concerns and making every possible attempt to incorporate them in the project, while also being realistic (with all actors involved in the engagement process) that the outcome won’t be the ‘perfect solution’ for everyone, at all times.

PR13: […] So these {public opinion} reports are made {after the engagement activity}, and we make them public, so "you said, we listened" and then "this is what we hope to do next". And then during the project, we'll have one engagement session where everyone can raise their concerns, then we'll meet them again and say, "we've listened to your comments, now this is what we're proposing". So hopefully we catch a few more of those concerns. […] And it's not going to be perfect, you're not going to please everyone, but people can see that you've listened to them and taken things on board... There's only so much you can do, for example, if you're constrained by things […] So often things aren't feasible, so we try and explain what we're working with. […]

And sometimes it's frustrating, because you can agree and think "that's a good point, I agree with you entirely, but for these reasons I've almost got one hand tied behind my back when we're designing this scheme, and what we're trying to create the best solution to what we experience now". So sometimes agreeing with them does help, because then it's not like you're looking down at them, you're saying you respect and agree with their opinion, and then you can try and put it into the solution, but while also being realistic that it won't always be the perfect solution every time.

Local authority

PR27 (below) reflects on the inevitability of stakeholder opposition to large planning and infrastructure projects, while raising the point that they may not be engaging with the range of opinion.

PR27: What we've been saying over the last two years is "okay, you're going to get opponents, there will always be opponents" and we can listen to them, ameliorate their concerns, we can help them keep informed… But at the end of the day, you're not going to turn them around. They're not going to feel good about 200 homes {being built}. But what we need to do is find the people who should be supportive of this… […] And nobody ever suggests you should {find supportive feedback} […] But actually, all planning is driven by housing need. And shouldn't you be listening to the people who have the housing need?

Consultancy

PR13 (below) also suggested that opposition and conflict is inevitable when engaging with some projects and groups of people. While they empathise that people are passionate and concerned about issues which affect their lives, they express frustration that they (as a member of staff in a local authority) are just doing their job and 'did not sign up to get abused'.

PR13: I think you always have to accept that there's always going to be people who are just there to have a pop at you, it's not personal, but they've identified a concern and they don't feel that anything's been done about it, they feel strongly and passionate about it, have got an opportunity to raise it with someone, so naturally their emotions take over. We've had to had events in the past that we've had to have policy presence at the door in case it goes badly. And then you kind of get to the point that you think, should we even be doing an event if we have to have someone at the door, such as a policeman, to make sure that things don't get out of hand? And I can understand why people get passionate and concerned, obviously you're impacting their livelihood - their house, their property, their garden, their families... You know, yes you understand that, and accept that it is a thing. But obviously, you're just doing your job, and you didn't sign up to get abused.

Local authority

In the quotes below, PR38 described how it is not always possible to engage stakeholders in the co-creation of decisions (e.g., when a decision is made in collaboration with stakeholders). As PR38 reflects, some stakeholders can't always be involved in making decisions and the organisation carrying out the engagement process has a distinct role in projects and decision-making. Here, PR38 is likely referring to specific requirements, obligations, and/or responsibilities with regards to this project – which is why some decisions/aspects can't always be involved in their decision-making. PR reflects that, when this is the case, more transparency and clear communication could help improve the ways that NGOs are engaged, helping to promote more trusting relationships.

PR38: I think it {best practice engagement} is probably to do with transparency and proper genuine engagement at that earliest stage. […] I think what's been happening is we're thinking 'oh, this is a great idea, we'll do this' but then we'll work it all up, we'll work the idea up, and then… […] Basically, we've got a plan, we might speak to {stakeholders} and tell them about it, {but that's} not proper engagement and joint decision-making. I mean, {stakeholders} can't always be involved in our decisions, you know, we have got a distinct role there. But there are lots of things that we could do to involve them in a better way, I think.

PR38: […] And I think they also feel that we don't involve them {stakeholders} enough in some of these big changes that we want to make, we don't involve them early on in the process, there's not proper co-creation in some of these projects and changes that we want to bring about. So, there is a lot of mistrust there, and I think there's a lot of work to do to build relationships. So, it sometimes feels a little bit like we might be paying a bit of lip service rather than really genuinely wanting people's views. And it's a little bit like box ticking.

Non-departmental public body

Several participants (PR13, PR18, PR23, PR27, PR29, PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39) described an inevitable opposition towards some decisions, as well as the staff and/or the organisation making them. The quotes below explore this issue in more depth, offering insights about how opposition can be navigated and managed within different organisational settings. For example, from the perspective of someone who works within a government department, PR18 describes how there can be 'pre conceived ideas' about the organisation and what they do. This can be difficult for staff members to navigate, particularly when building and maintaining trusting relationships with stakeholders (this issue is explored in more depth later in this section).

PR18: Yeah, I think definitely. To be honest, it's the first sort of thing that you think about when we go and talk to {stakeholders}. Obviously, we're talking to them as {a government department}, and there's a lot of pre conceived ideas about us and what we do. That's something to be so wary about. Because it's so important to be sensitive and try and build that trust. But it's also really, really hard, because there's a lot of deep rooted thinking around how government works, especially when we've been discussing {policy and Brexit}. And that obviously gets into conversation around wider political government in general, you have to be quite prepared for that. But that's kind of understandable, because most the time you might not see anyone from government, […] We are just seen as one government. That's the view that I take. We get all sorts of questions, and I think that's very fair to be honest. But it's definitely something to remember when we go to meet with {stakeholders}.

UK Government Department

From the perspective of PR27 (below), the planning system is "almost designed to attract objections" due to the focus on seeking the views of local residents (i.e., those living within close proximity to a site) and the prominence of issues in local communities. PR27 reflects that opposition can also be exaggerated by "jargon" which is difficult for stakeholders to understand, for example when the methods used by organisations to seek public views towards planning projects (letters, planning applications, etc.) are written in overly technical and specialist language.

PR27: One of our pitches to clients over the last couple of years has been that we have a planning system which is almost designed to attract objections. So certainly, with your normal exhibition, because what you normally do is you draw a radius around the site, and you invite everybody who lives within this radius. So immediate neighbours, who are most likely to object. You know, very few people are gonna feel good about someone coming in building 200 homes in a field that that they're currently looking at. […]

And then so you do your exhibition, you get shouted out, blah, blah blah, but {when} you've done your exhibition, you stick with your planning application in - what happens next? Then, how does the council tell anyone there's a planning application? They write to the people most likely to object, so they write to the immediate neighbours. And what do you get as a resident? You get a letter from your council, and well that's just automatically bad. No one ever looks forward to getting a letter from their Council. Because it's only ever Council Tax, parking fines, overdue library book...

So no one ever rips open a letter from the council and goes "Oh, great, I wonder what it says!". And you get a letter which is written in impenetrable planning jargon - we have received an outline application for 500 C3 units, with all matters reserved, etc. Then the residents think – "what does that mean? I've got no idea what that means. But there are big numbers in here - 500, 2000. So I'm just angry about this - this just sounds mad".

And the only other way you'll find out about the planning application, and we must be the only country in the world that does that, is somebody comes and tapes a notice to a lamppost. […]

Consultancy

In one interview, a conversation between PR35 (participants a and b) expands on these issues by describing the inevitable public opposition to some projects. In the dialogue below, both staff members emphasise the importance of capturing a 'balance' of (supportive and opposing) views. In the quote below, PR35b explains how there can be a very vocal minority who oppose a project, which can give the impression that a lot more people are in opposition than is actually the case. Echoing participants in the previous section (e.g., PR27, they reflect that people who support the project might not get a chance to have a say because of this.

PR35b: I think it just seems like... There is definitely a vocal minority who feel that they should be able to use the site any way that they want to, without interference. And I think that's something that we need to... That element just seems a bit of a problem, I think, and it would be good to put it in context. So, if that is just a small proportion of people {who are opposed}, then we can kind of demonstrate that that's a […] relatively unimportant part of the community, because it's so small. I just feel like that, I don't know, I might have got this wrong […], but I always feel like that element of it is so vocal, that maybe the supporters might not want to speak up...

Non-departmental public body

In agreement with the above comment by PR35b, PR35a provides an example of a situation where people in support of a project didn't feel comfortable speaking up during an engagement activity. In this situation, some engagement participants were aggressively in opposition of the project, which may have created a situation where those in favour felt that they were unable to speak up (or at risk of creating conflict if they did).

PR35a: Yeah, there is definitely an element to that, because when we had that public consultation on the open access, there was quite a few people in the meeting that stood up and were quite aggressive. And afterwards, there was a lot of people said, "Oh, we should have spoken up because we thought it was completely out of order", and it was far more people that sort of said that... I don't think I actually spoke to anyone that was actually in support of those {negative} views, and they felt a little bit embarrassed about the whole situation, because they felt that these views shouldn't be what the village on the whole... That the village didn't have those views at all, and they felt embarrassed about that.

Non-departmental public body

In the quote below, PR35b highlights the importance of considering representativeness in engagement as a way of understanding opposition. PR35b concludes that this signifies the importance of using methods which ensure that you are capturing a representative sample of people's views. PR35b reflects that if supportive voices are not heard, then a holistic view of the issue is not being represented. For example, if louder opposing voices are not managed, and balanced opinions are not captured and represented, then this can risk overlooking important factors (e.g., specific aspects of a project that some stakeholders want to support or protect). PR35a agrees with this again, providing another example of when this has happened during their day-to-day work. PR35b also raises an important point about the importance of having a rigorous process for engaging, having the skills to achieve this, and having confidence in carrying out the process.

PR35b: So if every time there's some kind of communication, and the biggest voices are these kind of problematic negative voices, then we're not actually ever showing the real picture, which hopefully is that people value the special communities at the sites, and they value the way that it's being managed and stuff like that. That's a bit of a problem, at the moment. Because then, the more that the negative voices are heard, the more that people maybe feel like that, like, could convince people, or it could make people feel like they don't want to stand up for what's actually going on there.

Non-departmental public body

PR35a: To be honest, when you do go out on site [to do a survey], you do get some people that feedback, positive stuff, but generally speaking it's always the people that approach you that have got something negative to say, quite often, which is why I guess sometimes it's perceived that there's more negative views there, because the positive views don't generally come to the fore.

Non-departmental public body

PR35b: I guess, if the survey was to take people at random and not... So I suppose that's why it's important to have people on site during the survey, isn't it, to make sure that it's not just the people who want to complain about something, to do the survey, to make sure that there's a cross section of whoever's going there.

Non-departmental public body

PR36 (below) emphasises the importance of being clear about what is within the organisation's remit and how their decision-making processes work (e.g., why particular decisions are being made, and how). One reason to do this is to avoid confusion and frustration materialising into conflict. However, although increased clarity can help manage expectations and conflict, it is more complex than this: for example, PR36 describes how some external organisations' identities are partially built on being in conflict with their organisation. This can be very difficult for staff to navigate, particularly when environmental issues are being portrayed by some stakeholders as the organisation's 'fault', and there is a sense of intense frustration that the organisation will 'always face opposition' from them. PR36 concludes that it would be more productive if the organisation and stakeholders found ways to work together on these issues.

PR36: In terms of bringing stakeholders with you, clarity on what we do and clarity on why our decision-making is good, is still going to be, I mean, the thing is you kind of bump up against opposition […] What they {stakeholders} tend to do is look for political ways to put pressure on us not to do something. […] Because they don't like the fact that they don't understand their decision, they just don't like it. […]

PR36: With a lot of the {stakeholders}, they have this they justify their existence by making it how useless we are you know like […] ‘look {the organisation is} meant to do this and they're rubbish’, or like ‘{the organisation} can't do this’, or whatever. So […] they try to 'other us' in that way… Or suggest that we’re just not relevant, or whatever. So, for example, {some stakeholders} take a lot of credit for the environmental gain over the last decades {however} every problem is {portrayed as} our fault. So, you’re always going to face opposition from people like that […] Dealing with that is tricky, and you know, trying to move that into a more constructive place where you go like “actually, if you worked with us, you probably would achieve a lot more than trying to set yourself up in opposition to us”.

Non-departmental public body

From the perspective of some of the interviewees (PR07, PR16, PR21, PR29, PR35a, PR35b, PR37, PR39), stakeholders can have too high, unrealistic, or very specific expectations of the engagement process. Interviewees reflected on some of the issues that can occur if these expectations are not met, such as conflict and eroding trust with stakeholders. These issues can arise, for example, due to organisational and project constraints which can limit staff capacity and capability to engage. This can lead to participants becoming misinformed, confused, disappointed, frustrated or even angry at the staff and organisation (these important issues are also explored throughout the other sections in this chapter). These situations can erode trusting relationships between participants and the organisation, which can adversely impact engagement and interactions in the future, as well as creating a range of negative impacts for both staff and participants.

These issues and risks are explained by PR16 below; in their view, managing expectations is about fulfilling promises while ensuring that participants’ expectations can be realistically achieved. In some situations, organisational constraints (as well as external issues and disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic) can make it difficult to manage expectations about what is practically achievable through engagement. If promises are made but not fulfilled, this can damage relationships and break trust with stakeholders, impacting the likelihood that engagement will achieve its goals or even happen at all.

PR16: It’s more about managing expectations […]. I think it’s more about fulfilling your promise saying, if you’re going to do this and get back to someone, actually follow it up. It’s more about that. And I feel like, in this current political climate, and everything that’s going on with COVID, it’s very important to manage expectations. And obviously, the fact that we’ve had to cancel three of the {engagement} webinars that we were going to do, it’s not really very good. Now, they {the participants} were really understanding, and obviously we had a lot of email correspondence to explain why we couldn't fulfil that commitment. […] And it's really those things that can erode trust… the fact that if we don't explain why we said we'd do one thing, and we did something else.

UK Government Department

This was echoed by PR07, who highlights how resource constraints (such as time and project funding) can mean that engagement does not happen the way that participants expect it. For example, if promises are made to participants that a project will lead to a particular long-term change or outcome, this might not happen in reality if the project funding runs out. In many situations, these issues are inevitable for organisations which operate using short-term engagement contracts, such as for research and consultancy projects. PR07 emphasises the importance of being transparent about these constraints with participants at the outset of the project, being honest about limitations to future impact of the project, and not making promises that can't being kept.

PR07: {Managing expectations is} really hard. And, yeah, it's something that I find really difficult because […] once the funding runs out, there's not much you can do about that. And I've always been very careful and making sure I haven't been making promises to people that I can't keep. […] So, I think it's just about being really upfront, and I can see how from {the stakeholders'} perspectives, that's really frustrating if they want to keep going for a longer period of time. So you know, if you've got a project that's only funded three years, then you have to be upfront about that from the very beginning and say, "Yeah, for those three years, I really want it to be co- produced and community led, and everyone participating", but after those 3 years I can't promise anything because […] you have to go with funding.

PR07: And so {one stakeholder} that I worked with […], I've kept in touch with them […] But it has to be at a very informal level because I don't have any funding left to do anything else. So yeah, it's frustrating, but I just think it's about being upfront, and being very honest about it. And then, you know, not making promises that you can't keep […].

University

Issues of trust and rapport are inherent to managing expectations. If promises are made during the engagement process, it is important to not only manage expectations around what can be achieved, but also to follow-up and maintain relationships with stakeholders (e.g. by providing regular updates and opportunities for feedback and evaluation). As discussed by PR21 below, important trusting relationships with stakeholders can be broken if they can't see any benefits resulting from their involvement, which can damage relationships and impact engagement in the future. It is important to build trust with stakeholders and *maintain* this over time, rather than to 'disappear' once the project has been completed without providing feedback to participants. This not only signifies the importance of trust, but also having a longer-term engagement strategy for stakeholder groups which involves establishing the relationship that stakeholders want (and whether it is feasible) at the outset. A strategy for disseminating project outcomes should also be devised with participants' expectations, as well as project and organisational constraints, in mind (and clearly communicating this to everyone involved).

PR21: I think… farmers appreciate the fact you've turned up and taken the time to see them. {However} I think there's a degree of scepticism about where it will get them. You know, like "I'm going to talk to you now, that's great, but will I actually see anything happen or change from these conversations? Or is it just me talking into the void?". I've had some people turn up and be very nice, but then they go off and disappear into the government machine and never come back again. It'd be interesting to talk to farmers and find out what they think of these things.

UK Government Department

The data in this section has explored some challenges associated with navigating stakeholder relationships with organisations, which can materialise in different ways in different contexts. Central to this is the importance of understanding that staff are rarely forming new relationships with stakeholders during the engagement process - stakeholders and/or customers will likely already have preconceptions about the organisation. It is clear that the (positive or negative) way that organisations are viewed can impact the quality of the engagement process and working relationships with stakeholders.

6.4.2 Developing stakeholder relationships

Managing expectations also requires managing relationships with stakeholders more broadly. Interviewees emphasised how transparency, honesty, and openness is central to (re) building and maintaining trusting relationships with stakeholder groups (12 out of 24 interviewees[75]). However, as the results of this section (6.4) shows, are a number of organisational challenges and constraints which can impact this. The previous section (6.4.1) explored challenges stemming from opposition and conflict with stakeholders. This section (6.4.2) builds on these findings, exploring the factors which can influence organisational (and staff) relationships with stakeholders, and the impact of this on engagement.

[75] Participant ID: PR16, PR18, PR21, PR27, PR29, PR30, PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39

Interviewees suggested that clarity around roles and responsibilities (linking to section 6.2.2) is an important consideration for managing and developing stakeholder relationships; organisational roles must be clearly communicated and accessible, so that stakeholders fully understand what is within the organisation's remit. For example, PR36 (below) raises key points about stakeholders becoming confused about what the organisation does and does not do, which can result in conflict and misunderstanding around what the organisation can achieve in relation to the issue being engaged on. PR36 draws from an example in their work where members of the public misunderstood the organisation's role for managing an environmental issue, expressing difficultly explaining that aspects of the job were not relevant to the organisation (as it's 'just not how they're set up'). They go on to reflect that improving the clarity of communication around the organisation's role is something that is being continuously improved by an internal working group (this also links to section 6.2.2).

PR36: There's a lot of confusion, even amongst people who should know better, as to what our role is. And that's not good. That tells you something's not working - either our guidance isn't good enough or we're just not visible enough in people's lives that they don't understand what we do.

Interviewer: So, there is confusion externally, not internally?

PR36: Yes, internally we know what we are doing, well, tend to. But people externally have no idea who we are. […] There is constant confusion over what our role is with {named activity}, constant confusion, because for example we don't prosecute for {specific activity}, we prosecute for breaches of {another specific activity}. Well, that's a subtlety that is lost on everyone, you know, we're constantly asked "Oh, what about this {specified} offense?" and we say "Well, look, it's a matter for the police", and that looks like we're sort of shuffling it off and we're not, we're just like "That's just now how we're set up". […]

So I think clarity on what we do would actually go a long way to deal with a lot of stakeholder problems, it really would. And it's actually something that I've been looking at recently with my working group, on how we can go about improving stakeholder engagement, and our regulatory function. So […] clarity on that is key.

Non-departmental public body

Echoing this, PR30 (below) describes the challenges they can experience when meeting stakeholders who have no existing relationship with them (or their organisation). This can contribute to a sense of nervousness amongst staff (who may worry what stakeholders will think and how they will react), and frustration amongst stakeholders if they misunderstand the organisation's role and intentions.

PR30: And most of them don't know us, they don't know who we are. So in that session, you're a little nervous, you're thinking "Well, actually, they don't know us, and we don't have this relationship with them". We just have their archdeacons on the court as well, which is really good. So that's tricky, I think.

Because if the {stakeholders} know that we know our stuff... The ones that we deal with. And I don't think there's another organisation in the county that does. And I think that's the same for all the other […] community councils, probably. […] I think it comes across easier face to face, you know – “I'm not some bureaucrat, I'm not here just parroting, I understand why you're frustrated”.

Charity/not-for-profit

Interviewees also suggested that the organisation’s image and reputation was a consideration when managing stakeholder relationships. In the quote below, PR21 reflects on the importance of image and reputation – of both staff members and the organisations they are representing – when fostering trusting relationships with stakeholders. Although PR21 describes this within the context of one specific project and stakeholder group (farmers and policy decision-making), it points to a more fundamental issue regarding the importance of being open and transparent during the engagement process (in other words, coming across as a ‘normal’ human being and not ‘hiding’ behind policy and specialist language).

PR21: I think that physical presence is key, just showing that you're not just a bunch of faceless bureaucrats sitting in an office in London. In fact, most of us aren't in London. […]

Yeah, I do genuinely think that farmers find it refreshing for you to turn up and just look normal. Okay, you might not be wearing a Barbour jacket and carrying a sheep over your arm, but you're not turning up in a three piece {suit} carrying a clip board. I think most farmers know that we're not like that, but at the same time, you can get a little bit of a sense that {the government} is over there in London, and I think sometimes they... If you meet them face to face, I think that they appreciate the fact that you've made the effort to get there. But also, you can have a little bit more of the small talk, and it begins to make things a bit more human - they realise there is a human being there. I mean, I've been to things where I've heard corporate lines being given and you can see people's eyes glazing over, but I don't think that can be avoided entirely. But yeah, the engagement element, it does show that you're prepared to actually go and front up, and not just hide behind policy and papers, and within the four walls of the office that you operate out of.

UK Government department

There are specific organisational constraints (e.g. available time and resources, political sensitivities, uncertainties) which can affect stakeholder relationships with organisations. PR29 (below) describes how some stakeholders can have a long history of mistrust and conflict with government organisations, which can be a significant barrier to best practice engagement. This is clearly something which needs long-term investment and dedication (e.g., by the organisation) to find solutions and repair any damaged relationships – it is not a 'quick fix'.

PR29: […] Previously, {an academic} did a paper on this about social capital, and identified that 20-30 years ago, farmers did have trust with the government - they liked their advisors, they had a relationship with them, and they knew them on a first name basis, and that kind of thing. And it made it a lot easier to get in touch with them, and engage with them, and they weren't in fear of getting a telling off, or something like that... You know, they could be open with them. But this has changed. It's not like it's impossible for people to have trust government, or governmental advisors, or related government agencies, but it just hasn't been there over the past 10-15 years. And that's one of the big barriers. But the problem with that is you're going to have to look for more long term solutions to that, you're not going to fix it overnight.

University

The way that stakeholders view organisations can be improved over time. For example, PR37 (below) reflects on how their organisation's reputation has improved in recent times - this was partly due to increased visibility (and clarity) of the organisation's role and a closer, more joined-up working relationship with other key organisations.

PR37: I think our reputation has increased […] and actually, I think they've done quite a good job in improving our visibility within {government department} and making sure that we're a bit more joined up with {government department} rather than kind of, I think perhaps you might have felt like the poor cousin before. That's the impression that I got from working within the organisation. So yeah, I think image is a really important thing.

And I think part of one of our issues is that people just don't know who {the organisation} is, you know, I'll say to people, they say, "oh who do you work for?" I'll be like "Oh, for {the organisation}", "Oh, who's that?", […] Yeah, people just don't know.

Non-departmental public body

In the quote below, PR27 (below) describes how different organisations can also have negative views of each other, which can impact the relationships and dynamics during the engagement process. This is particularly important to consider if there are numerous organisations working together as stakeholders. In the example below, stakeholders from a planning department or organisation felt that parish councillors had insufficient knowledge of the planning process to contribute effectively. On the other hand, other stakeholders may feel that planners are not acting in the best interests of the local communities. PR27 describes this as a 'spectrum' of stakeholder attitudes towards one another. These dynamics highlight the importance of conducting engagement whilst understanding the wider context within which it is being conducted. As PR27 describes, this includes understanding the political climate into which the intervention (e.g., decision, output, or outcome) is landing. This includes understanding what different organisations relationships and perspectives of one another, and that these dynamics can change depending on the context.

PR27: So what we do is to help you understand the political climate in which you're operating, and how best to present your proposals in a way that meets that. To understand who the people that politicians listen to are. There is no point spending a lot of time and money getting the parish Council on board... So, some planning committees are like "what does the parish council think about this? We should do whatever the parish council does". That's one end of the spectrum. {One stakeholder organisation} views the parish councils as a bunch of unelected turnip farmers who shouldn't be allowed to have an opinion about anything, and certainly not about planning. And it's to do with the planning committee what happens, not the town council. And you need to know what end of the spectrum you're at. Some planning committees are very swayed by their planning officers, others think their planning officers are a bunch of good for nothing, lily livered, more responsive to the RTPI than local councillors, "not our planning officers"... So it's a spectrum.

Consultancy

PR39 (below) also implied that it was important to consider the wider political context of engagement and its potential impact on stakeholder relationships.

PR39: {Some stakeholders} are really scared that there are measures {that} simply aim to facilitate development, and {they're} untrusting of […] government and the development and economic sort of agenda of government, which, because at the end of the day, whatever it says about the environment, all governments are mostly concerned about the economy, because that's what keeps the country running.

Non-departmental public body

This section has explored interviewees' perceptions of the challenges that organisations and/or staff members can experience when managing stakeholders' expectations of the engagement process. The next section explores restrictions to both individual (e.g., staff) and organisational agency for carrying out engagement.

6.5 Agency

This theme explores challenges regarding both individual and organisational agency (i.e., the ability of a group, individual, organisation to have the power to fulfil their potential), and the impact of this on engagement. Interviewees highlighted challenges that can arise when organisations to not provide individual staff with the agency to undertake engagement, as well as factors that can restrict the agency of organisations themselves (14 out of 24 interviewees[76]). See Box 21 for a summary of the findings presented in this section.

While this section offers several examples from local and national government, as well as government agencies, these issues were shown to be experienced more widely – the central issue here is organisational constraints on the agency of the individual carrying out engagement. The reasons for these constraints are varied, change between different organisational/institutional and decision-making contexts, and may be embedded in wider political and socio-economic structures. Although these issues can change between different organisations, the common thread is staff and organisational agency. For example, the data in this section suggests that a lack of staff agency can be caused by an unexpected change during the engagement process (e.g., in policy direction or organisational priority.

The agency of the person conducting engagement is linked to, and builds upon, their ability to manage expectations and foster trusting relationships with stakeholders. The following sections explore issues around trust dynamics. For example, whether staff members trust the organisation to enable them to do best practice engagement, or if the organisation trusts staff members to conduct engagement in best practice ways. These are all factors which can impact staff's own ability (and confidence in doing so) to fulfil their potential for carrying out best practice engagement.

[76] Participant ID: PR01, PR03, PR06, PR09, PR12, PR13, PR16, PR21, PR26, PR28, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39

Box 21. Summary of key findings: agency.

This section draws on interview responses to explore perceptions and experiences of restrictions to both individual (staff) and organisational agency for carrying out engagement.

- Lack of agency can make it difficult to manage expectations with stakeholders during the engagement process.
    - This can be caused by actors within, or external to, organisations who can make decisions which disrupt (or even terminate) engagement processes.
    - Engagement processes can be highly influenced by changing and unpredictable organisational and decision-making environments.
    - This can be both frustrating for the individual/organisation carrying out engagement, as well as risking long-term relationships with stakeholders.
- Staff members carrying out engagement can feel that their organisation does not trust them enough to engage in particular ways, or even at all.
    - This can undermine staff member's confidence in engaging.
    - It's important that organisations provide staff with the agency to carry out engagement, whilst being clear on potential issues and restrictions (and providing support on how to navigate them).
- In some situations, one organisation can be controlled by another organisation, which can restrict what can be achieved through stakeholder engagement.
    - For example, organisations can have to adhere to protocols set by an external body, which can impact engagement and when/how it happens.
- Organisational agency can be restricted by external controls on their ability to communicate with members of the public (and other stakeholders).
    - This can include restrictions on what can be communicated through an organisation's press office and communications teams.
    - There are additional challenges when communicating and engaging online, including how (and when) information is shared.
    - Restrictions on what can be said (and how) during the engagement process can impact relationships with stakeholders. For example, lack of clarity and delays to key information can result in stakeholders becoming disillusioned and not trusting the process and engaging organisation.

6.5.1 Restrictions on agency

This section is about organisational restrictions and control on staff (individual) agency. Here, agency is understood as the capacity and capability of individuals to have the power and resources to fulfil their potential to engage. For instance, actors both within and external to organisations can influence factors that can limit staff and their decisions to engage. In other words, there can be external restrictions and control on what can be done (and how) during the engagement process, which can be difficult to predict and manage. There are particular organisational constraints which can make managing expectations with stakeholders difficult during engagement processes. This can be due to complex and interlinked societal and organisational factors which operate both internally and externally to the organisation. The majority of participants (12 out of 24 interviewees[77]) described difficulties engaging in an organisational environment which is influenced by changeable government decision-making and policy directions.

Liking to the previous section, lack of staff agency can make it difficult to manage expectations with stakeholders. For example, PR16 (below) described a situation where managing expectations with participants was hard when government policy directions could change rapidly. This can impact the goals of engagement, who can be involved (and how), or whether engagement can even be conducted at all (or at that time). Although this theme is partly about the challenges experienced when managing stakeholder expectations (section 6.4), this speaks to the wider issue of restrictions and controls (such as policy decision-making) on both staff and organisational agency to engage.

> **PR16:** I think, it's really important to manage expectations {around engagement} and commit to what you're doing. Which can, in policy land, be very hard, because things change so quickly – a Minister could turn around and say "Oh, no, I'm not interested in that anymore, I don't want to do that anymore". And you could have planned all this engagement, then actually, suddenly, you haven't got approval to do it."
>
> *UK Government Department*

Expanding on this, PR16 reflects that staff want to do best practice engagement, however there are people "higher up", such as Ministers and policy decision-makers, who can impact this. Rapidly changing and unpredictable organisational and decision-making environments (whether this is due to policy directions, top-down decision-making, time and resource constraints, or something else) can reduce the likelihood of engagement meeting its goals, or even happening at all. This can create frustrations amongst practitioners responsible for

[77] Participant ID: PR03, PR09, PR12, PR13, PR16, PR21, PR23, PR27, PR28, PR37, PR38, PR39)

carrying out engagement, for example when a lot of time, effort, and resources has been put into planning engagement which is then cancelled unexpectedly. It can also create issues for practitioners' (and organisations') relationships with stakeholders (linking with section 6.4.2), particularly when stakeholder's expectations of engagement have not been met. PR16 reflects that it is difficult to communicate challenges regarding external controls and restrictions on engagement, without damaging stakeholder relationships or causing conflict (linking with section 6.5.2). It is clear that the themes in this chapter are complex and interwoven.

> **PR16:** I think that's the real issue with policy and government, and those relationships with stakeholders, because… again, it comes back to the whole power thing. We want to do this engagement, {and} we want to do it properly, but at the end of the day there's still people higher up that could make decisions that sort of derail your whole plan… which can be frustrating. And it's just about trying to communicate that to people, which is quite hard.
>
> *UK Government Department*

In some situations, the agency of an entire organisation can be controlled by another organisation. In the quote below, PR12 shares their perspective on how the UK's bureaucratic political system is linked to increased centralised control over decision-making. They reflect that although political agendas have resulted in less direct control for some organisations (such as local authorities), a more central approach has resulted in increased transparency. For example, there are government requirements for sharing information (the pros and cons of this, including the use of centralised websites and other online communications strategies, are discussed in more depth later in this section).

> **PR12:** So, we've taken that and we said, "Actually, we have a bureaucratic political system, with hopefully reasonably reliable accountabilities, that redistributes this nationalised right to development, as of the 1940-something Planning and Land Act, or whatever it was". So, at one end of the scale, you've got this quite remote, bureaucratic political process, which has become less and less directly controllable by local authorities. Some of it for the worse, like the permitted development of office blocks, which Osborne brought in, which has been horrific. Some of it has been better, you know, it's much more transparent. You can't just do deals on the golf course, behind closed doors, like you used to, because agendas are published, because meetings are broadcast, and so on, because you disseminate things on social media it's much easier for campaigners to organise themselves, and so on.
>
> *Software company*

Expanding on the above quote, PR12 (below) highlights a disconnect between what they describe as a ‘pent up’ demand to engage amongst the public, and political bureaucratic processes (e.g., election cycles). As well as restricting the agency of those conducting engagement, these bureaucratic political systems can limit opportunities for members of the public and other key stakeholders to participate in decision-making. From the perspective of PR12, this dissonance is something that can be (partly) overcome through participatory tools and technologies.

PR12: So going back to transparency, there is much more transparency because a lot of the mechanics of this political bureaucratic process are in the public domain, so they're accessible. I mean, you could always go to the library and look for agendas, but not a lot of people could, it's much easier to do now. And the {online} tools instantaneously bring that to the public domain, make it readily available, and make it really easy to access. So, what you find is this very strange disconnect, where you have hyper activism on social media, and real detachment of people from the bureaucratic and political processes. And my benign interpretation of the kind of noise on social media around local issues, and planning issues, and this and that, is that it's actually pent-up demand to engage. But the tools that we have, like with the rather political bureaucratic process with a kind of four- or five-year election cycle or whatever, you know there's just a complete dissonance between the two. And if you can find a way of capturing the pent-up demand to be involved, which is manifest in social media, and convert it into data that the political bureaucratic process can use, you're onto something. And that's what {our organisation} tries to do.

Software company

PR28 describes another example of one organisation controlling another organisation’s ability to engage, for example by imposing restrictions on what can and can’t be done when communicating information to the public. Restrictions on engagement practitioners’ ability to communicate and disseminate information impacted on the nature and quality of engagement processes. In the quote below, PR28 expressed difficulties they experienced with regards to seeking permission from the organisation to use a particular digital engagement tool.

PR28: […] We’ve struggled to get through all the hurdles. It’s a government-related thing, so there are lots of hurdles put up that you need to jump over. Because it’s public facing, I’ve had to go through the Cabinet Office. There’s a thing called Government Digital Service and I have to get their approval to basically be able to create a public-facing domain.

Non-departmental public body

Echoing many of these concerns, other participants who experienced top-down controls on their engagement activities by more senior staff in the organisation. PR13 (below) describes one situation experienced by a member of staff in a county council, who was currently involved in public engagement in transport planning and development. This participant and their colleague had put a lot of time and effort into planning an engagement activity, however the decision was made that the process should be conducted by more senior members of staff. The engagement activity was then cancelled when the senior staff found that they did not have the time to run the session. Although PR13 found this frustrating because they had planned the session (and knew that they had the ability to do it), they were also understanding of the pressures and time constraints that the senior staff were under.

PR13: We had some plans {to engage}, we actually had the script written out, it was all planned… My colleague and I were going to do it, do the narration, but then they decided no, it should come from someone higher above… It got to the point where the "higher powers" never quite got together and actually did the script, and then it got scrapped. Which was frustrating because obviously we planned it all out, and we knew we could do it, but we were told that they should come from Cabinet Members for highways, and it shouldn't come from our level. So, it was frustrating.

… I feel like it {engagement} was one of those things when they said "Yes, good idea…". And then they probably didn't realise what they were taking on… It was 10 or 15 minutes long… So, they might not have had time to do it, and instead of coming clean about it, they just kicked it into the long grass, so it didn't happen.

Local authority

Upon reflection of these issues, PR13 suggests that more careful planning and foresight is key to more effective engagement strategy in the future. This could include being explicit about time and other resource commitments, highlighting potential risks early on, and clearly communicating them to everyone involved in the process. This suggests that as well as managing stakeholder's expectations, it's critically important to manage the expectations of the staff tasked with carrying out the engagement process (e.g., being clear about the time and resources needed, as well as potential risks and benefits). This need for more "forward planning" highlighted by PR13 is discussed in more depth in section 6.6.3, which explores the need for more long-term planning and strategy to embed engagement in organisations.

PR13: I think maybe they just need more forward planning, I guess, giving it a longer timeframe… Maybe from our point of view, if we explained exactly what it entails {to senior staff}, so “it’ll be 15 minutes of this, you speak for only this time” … Or maybe break it down, if that’s not manageable, because naturally you might not get it right the first time, you might get something wrong, or say something wrong... So you might need to do several takes or break it down so it’s less of an undertaking in one go, because I appreciate that they might have a lot of pressures and stresses and stuff they have to do. So I think it’s something we need to look at in the future, and plan a bit better, rather than there being any particular barriers to it.

Local authority

This issue of lack of agency was echoed by PR39 (below), who stressed the importance of the trusting junior staff to conduct engagement and speak on behalf of the organisation. This was also highlighted by PR38 (also below), who at one point was not able to engage directly due to lack of seniority. The organisation needs to allow staff to have the agency to fulfil their potential and talk more freely during the engagement process, which is particularly important as they can be the ‘best advocates’ for the work that the organisation does.

PR39: I think they need a little bit more trust, to let people trust more junior people to talk on behalf of {the organisation}, because they are at the coalface end of {the organisation}. There are a lot of really passionate and skilful people who really know what they’re talking about, and they may not be always on corporate message, but I think that, you know, they’re some of our best advocates for what we try and do, so, it’s important to allow people to talk more freely.

Non-departmental public body

PR38: […] So, I think it’s a bit of a mixture of stuff. Some of that is a bit of a lack of confidence with staff as well in terms of how to engage, I think, you know, one point I think we were even told that we weren’t allowed to {engage}, you know, and it had to be done at a senior level.

Non-departmental public body

PR39 provides further detail about this issue, explaining how there are ways that the organisation can ‘hand over’ control and increase their willingness to give staff more agency to engage. Later on, PR39 reflects that there are elements of central control in the organisation which can restrict staff’s ability to engage – for example, the perceived lack of control over messaging, which was also mentioned by PR38 (this issue is discussed in more depth in section 6.5.2).

PR39:	[…] I think we've not been very good engagement […] Once upon a time, we did a lot of engagement […]. And then the organisation got very much more central in terms of its engagement and control over the message. And then there seemed to be a lot less willingness to let just frontline staff, you know, ordinary members of staff, do the engagement. It became much more about plans for engagement and stakeholder managers who took over the role of leading the engagement with particular organisations, and it tended to be engagement led by directors and above. A lot of that day-to-day context we had at a more officer level seemed to disappear. I don't suspect that happened across the whole organisation, but it seemed to affect the area where I was working quite a lot. And I think we lost something. […]

Non-departmental public body

The themes in the following sections build on this issue of both internal and external controls over communication and information sharing, which directly impacts what can be done during the engagement process.

6.5.2 Communicating information

This section builds on the previous section by exploring how staff and organisational agency can be limited by restrictions on how organisations communicate information to public and stakeholder audiences. Here, the term 'communications' is considered to include any method of disseminating or exchanging knowledge, for example between an organisation and members of the public. Several participants spoke about both internal and external controls over the type of information they could share, when, with whom, and the type of methods they could use to do this (PR03, PR13, PR28, PR37, PR38, PR39). This section includes considerations relevant to organisations whose communications strategy can be restricted (or facilitated) by an external body, and the impact of this on staff's agency to engage.

Several interviewees raised some key considerations relating to working with (and engaging via) websites and other methods of online communication – particularly those which were operated and controlled by an external organisation - which can ultimately impact the agency of those carrying out engagement (PR03, PR13, PR28, PR37, PR38, PR39). These themes link with some of the discussion in the previous chapter on digital engagement (e.g., section 5.6 and 5.9.1).

On one hand, having a centralised website can be beneficial for pooling information in an accessible format (such as bespoke project information, contact details, and a central platform for coordinating queries). This can help increase the visibility of key information, giving both stakeholders and staff to access the information they need, ask questions, and engage over the key issues. PR13 (below) describes how their organisation uses a centralised gov.uk website – and some of the benefits - in the quote below.

PR13: […] We also started using Twitter as well, the council, trying to push stuff out through Twitter. We also have the […] gov.uk website, which has all the schemes we do with their own web page, so you can go on and find more information and contact details for particular queries or bespoke information. We normally have a 28-day window to reply to them, so we're trying to turn round information as quickly as possible, but sometimes the breadth of stuff that they ask for is just too big to do in that window, so we'll suggest to meet them for a chat, or invite them to come to an engagement event and we'll try and sit down with them because sometimes it's too much to just send out in an email.

Local authority

Other participants described issues with centralised organisational websites (PR03, PR28, PR38, PR39). This can create additional constraints on the information that can be shared, restricting staff's ability and agency for carrying out effective engagement. For example, although PR39 (below) recognises that a centralised approach to communications can be beneficial for providing a 'one-stop-shop' of information, they reflect that it can be difficult (and time consuming) to publish information on their organisation's website, for example when information needs to go through steps of moderation. PR39 comments that this can create difficulties for engagement because it can restrict what is published and when, which can impact the timeliness of their stakeholder engagement.

PR39: […] we don't have our own website, it's increasingly difficult for us to post things {online}. I understand the government wants to have an across government website, but there's sometimes stuff we want to publish which just doesn't sit comfortably within the structure of .gov.uk and we have nowhere to publish it […] which affects our ability to talk to people. There are good points around making things simple and having a one-stop-shop, but […] It's tricky when we're in a situation where being able to respond rapidly is important.

Non-departmental public body

PR03 (below) was aware of several restrictions which were important to consider when engaging including formatting (e.g. for images and hyperlinks), interoperability (e.g. issues navigating information hosted on multiple website platforms), accessibility (e.g. for those who may struggle reading online information), and compatibility (e.g. adhering to strict government guidelines). Some of these issues were also raised by PR22 (below).

PR03: […] So the parish council website, you're not allowed to use PDF documents etc. If you go to a government website like gov.uk, there are no pictures. […] We're in a state of flux. All different things happening. For instance, we have an issue at the moment with a large road closure and just accessing the {county council} website. They've now gone from having their own in-house mapping service telling us when the roads closed, and now you go to the separate website, because it's not actually like the government website. They're not constrained by the government gov.uk requirements […]. Before we could go into the […] county council, road section and access maps etc. there. […] Also […], we have to reconfigure our website to be .gov.uk compatible. That's basically a fallout from the EU directories.

Parish Council

PR22: […] Then there are restrictions, for example one of my project managers said they could only do something on {Microsoft} Teams […]. So, it's what people can use within their organisations too - who gets restricted because of the software choices {within organisations}, and how do we get a more generic approach which everyone is happy with, and that everyone can access?

Consultancy

Restrictions and controls on online communication can impact the sort of information that is shared, tools and methods that are used, the clarity and accessibility of resources, and so forth. For example, PR28 (below) describes how the organisation's use of a centralised government website limited their ability to use specific participatory methods (participatory GIS) and share relevant information. In this situation, their organisation required that this participatory GIS tool via the government website, however the staff members had to communicate that this was not possible due to the technical requirements of the tool. In other words, the tool was not compatible with the website. PR28 reflects that having more independence for sharing information, hosting tools/platforms and data would be useful.

PR28: The main issue here was that I had to demonstrate why we could not share the {participatory GIS} tool via the gov.uk website. They like to

	centralise everything and put it all into the same kind of package, whatever it is, you know. There were more technical issues, because we needed to host our own servers, so we had easy access to adapt and amend the software, link it to baseline data, etc. You have to go through this kind of rigmarole to be able to do something that's more independent.
Interviewer:	Okay, so they wanted it integrated in the main government site?
PR28:	Yeah, the first question they asked was "well, why can't this be part of the main government site?" and the response from us was "well, it's not going to work".

Non-departmental public body

In the quote below, PR28 elaborates on this issue by highlighting some specific GDPR considerations which arose from discussions about hosting their participatory GIS tool on the government website. They reflect that these are all considerations around ensuring that staff are 'ticking boxes' and conducting their work in a way that meets various government regulations. This links to section 6.3.1 which explores nervousness around various risks including GDPR breaches and legal considerations during the engagement process.

PR28: We also had to go through quite a few discussions around meeting the requirements for GDPR. So, on the new tool, people have to agree to terms and conditions. And we had to be really clear about the photographs people could submit, so things like you can't show people's faces. And there's an age restriction, under 16s or something weren't really supposed to find certain data... I think we've got around GDPR now because we're not identifying individuals, we're collecting district-level postcodes, so roughly the broad area that people are from. And if people mention names in the open text boxes, we have the right to remove it. So, we were very clear about what we can and can't do. I think overall, it's just about ticking boxes and making sure that we're doing what we should be doing.

Non-departmental public body

PR37 felt that their organisation lacked visibility online, and that the visibility that the organisation did have was problematic (e.g., impersonal and difficult to understand). They emphasise the importance of having good visibility online for stakeholder engagement, which links to themes in Chapter 5 which explore effective online communication (e.g., section 5.8).

PR37: […] IT has really opened up opportunities that wouldn't have been included before […] On the other hand, we are much less visible {online}. That's one of the things, {what's really important, that I haven't mentioned… And that is our web presence […] {is} really impersonal, and

I find it difficult to read, I can image anybody who comes to it is going to be like "Oh what's this? I don't really fancy reading that".

PR37: […] We have got a little bit of social media presence, but not much. […] the limitations in terms of our web presence, and our social media presence, is said to be a real barrier by people within our […] team. Because it's such an important thing to kind of have linked with image.

Non-departmental public body

Linking with the challenges explored in section 6.4.2, PR39 (below) emphasised the importance of being able to talk freely and honestly with stakeholders (without communicating an overly political message).

PR39: […] I found that people {stakeholders} respect you if you talk honestly, and they don't just want a political message. But, you know, that there is a sort of sense of this, because we're so tied into {politics}. It's difficult for us to {have} that space for just speaking our mind a bit […].

Building on this, PR39 (below) described how external controls on communication can place staff in a counter-constructive position for engagement (e.g., when staff are unable to engage effectively due to lack of seniority, or when restrictions are placed on the information that can be shared with stakeholders, and so forth). This point was also raised by PR38. Linking with 6.5.1, PR39 later reflects how restrictions on communications can contribute to staff (or organisational) nervousness about engaging.

PR39: […] So {government} signs off everything […] {which is not} a terribly constructive place to be. […] I mean, we're not in the business of being difficult or unhelpful to government, we never have been. But I think it's not helpful that we don't have our own voice […]

PR39: […] I think there's a nervousness. It's difficult to do it {engagement} when […] {government} don't want unhelpful messages, and therefore tend not to perhaps trust people as much as they could.

Non-departmental public body

PR38 added that these issues can limit their ability to reach wider audiences and raise awareness, particularly when there are delays and complexities which can prevent more effective forms of engagement.

PR38: […] In terms of our ability to reach a wider audience and do public awareness raising, it feels quite limited to the opportunities. […] This whole work area really hinges on a government decision […], there's a lot of nervousness […] which sort of curtails the activity we might want to have in terms of understanding stakeholder views. And we're sort of bound […] before we can do anything more proactive, which does, you know, cause a number of issues for us.

Non-departmental public body

For PR39, restrictions on organisational communications can be 'exhausting' to manage, but they note that there are intentions to improve this situation. They also reflect that the COVID-19 pandemic placed additional restrictions on their ability to communicate to public and stakeholder groups (the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is explored in the previous chapter, particularly in section 5.2 – the findings suggest that the pandemic, and shift to entirely remote/digital communications, had a considerable impact on the quality and efficiency of stakeholder engagement).

PR39: […] It's just exhausting trying to talk externally at the press level, and that's obviously not all engagement, but it's symptomatic of a more controlling approach to comms. So, despite some good intentions, […] I think there's a bit of a hangover from that. Of course, Coronavirus has not helped matters, because it makes it difficult for us to go out and meet people […].

Non-departmental public body

Building on the above quote, PR38 (below) reflects that although external controls and nervousness around communications can cause issues and restrict stakeholder engagement activity, there are valid reasons and protocols for this.

PR38: I think it's about the way that that they […] work, and the order of things, and I suppose the sort of protocol that they follow. {But} it does complicate things I guess if they want to do something in a certain way, and be seen doing it in the right way, {and} if we then intervene to seek views it does muddle up that process and complicate things. So yeah, I think there is a valid reason for why that happens, I guess.

Non-departmental public body

This section has explored the challenges regarding both individual and organisational agency and the impact of this on engagement. The final section below addresses the importance of embedding long-term goals and ambition for engagement across organisations.

6.6 Planning and strategy

This theme explores interviewees' perceptions of having a clear and consistent plan and strategy for engagement processes across the organisation (14 out of 24 interviewees[78]). This includes having consistent guidance and regulations for engagement (6.6.1), which should be embedded as part of a wider engagement strategy which can be adapted to suit different needs across the organisation (6.6.2). Section 6.6.3 brings together many of the themes in this chapter, drawing on the data to explore what embedding long-term goals and ambition for engagement might look like. The data suggests that any engagement plan or strategy (accompanied by guidance) should provide detail about the role of engagement activities and what is expected of staff, consider any training/support requirements, outline the aims and parameters for engagement and identify other staff in the organisation who may be able to help support the work (e.g., those in dedicated engagement roles). Box 22 provides a summary of the findings.

[78] Participant ID: PR01, PR07, PR09, PR16, PR22, PR25, PR27, PR30, PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39

Box 22. Summary of key findings: planning and strategy.

This section draws on interview responses to explore interviewees' perceptions of having a clear, consistent, and adaptable organisation-wide strategy for engagement.

- It is importance to have clear guidance for engagement with clear steps/stages from the start, throughout the process, and beyond. This should include how to engage with particular stakeholders, build relationships, select methods, signposting knowledge and training opportunities.
- Lack of adequate guidance available in organisations can impact engagement. For example, staff can feel less confident in engaging.
    - Guidance can be limited depending on available funding, resources, and organisational support.
    - Guidance needs to be realistically achievable with the organisation's capacity, recognising any limitations (and how to overcome them).
- Guidance needs to be adaptable to the needs of staff across different parts of the organisation.
    - Embedding and supporting engagement should start with understanding staff need and how this might change across the organisation, including the issues for understanding / implementing guidance (e.g., due to it being lengthy, using technical jargon, or not adequately signposted).
    - Engagement (supported by guidance) needs to adapt as situations change, or as new considerations emerge, throughout the process.
- As well as clear guidance, there needs to be organisational (or sector-wide) minimum requirements for engagement and a system for monitoring compliance.
    - For example, a minimum requirement to engage at a basic level, which could be reinforced by the law.
- Engagement needs to be embedded at the heart of organisation's strategy, which requires consistency, careful planning, and clear goals/ambition.
    - Embedding engagement can require a culture change which takes time and dedication – it is a slow process, not quick changes.
    - Staff need to be empowered to engage and it needs to be embedded as a fundamental part of the work that they do.
    - The long-term success of engagement requires joined-up thinking and consistency across the organisation (e.g., consistent understandings of engagement and an organisational goal to work towards).
- Embedding engagement through a culture shift requires both top-down (e.g., from leadership) and bottom-up action (e.g., from staff).
    - Where possible, stakeholders should be involved in setting the organisation's strategic priorities for engagement.
    - Engagement needs to be embedded as a proactive rather than reactive process which requires long-term forward planning (e.g., awareness of the organisational challenges for engagement and how to mitigate them).

6.6.1 Guidance and regulations

This section is about the importance of having clear guidance and regulations for staff carrying out engagement in their organisation (13 out of 24 interviewees[79]). The data in this section shows that while there was a common need for guidance between participants, guidance means different things to different people, can come in many forms, and can be used for a variety of different purposes.

For PR35a and PR37, it was important to know 'where to start' with engagement and have guidance throughout the entire process. In the quote below, PR35a describes the importance of having step-by-step guidance, including what engagement is and what it involves. Here, PR35 (a) makes a more fundamental point about the importance of viewing engagement as a *process* – with a series of actions, steps, or stages – and having appropriate guidance to support staff through this process. In other words, the data suggests that it is importance to have clear guidance for the entire engagement process, from start to finish, and beyond (e.g., how to evaluate and improve on engagement in the long-term). For PR35a, having guidance for engagement was important for encouraging stakeholders to appropriately use a site that needed protecting. This involved communicating technical information about environmental conservation to stakeholders and members of the public (in this situation, communicating the damage to a nature reserve caused by visitors), as well as finding out about how people use the area and engaging them in the management of the site.

PR35 (1): Yeah, {guidance} would definitely be a good idea. I mean this isn't stuff that I've thought about, because I've never done this {best practice engagement} before. But that, yeah, I think that would probably be a good idea. […]

So, you can see, if you know the site, and you go into like Google Maps and look at the satellite imagery, you can actually see the footpaths across the site. And then if you're actually walking on the site you can see there's a lot more new trampled areas on top of that as well […]. But because people are constantly walking all over the place, if you joined all of those walks together, and look at how much of an area that impacts on the site, you're talking quite a big percentage of the site is trashed basically because of the trampling and compaction etc. […]

Yeah, obviously we want people to come, but it's about encouraging them to come and use the site appropriately.

Non-departmental public body

[79] Participant ID: PR01, PR07, PR09, PR16, PR22, PR27, PR30, PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39

For PR37, not knowing how to reach and engage with specific stakeholders was a barrier for some members of staff. They reflect that guidance can include activities like stakeholder mapping to help identify key stakeholders, providing guidance for the "first steps" of the engagement process. Guidance or "toolkits" can also signpost key skills required and training opportunities (linking with section 6.3).

PR37: […] I think one of the other things that people have a bit of a barrier to, or concerns about is, 'Okay, I've got a project, I know I need to engage with people, {but} how do I go and communicate with the people that I think I probably ought to communicate with, but I don't know how to reach them...?'. So, you know if I want to engage with {specific stakeholder group}, for example. Or […] say if you're a {site} on an urban fringe, and you want to be reaching out to the whole community, how do we get into that community to let them know what's here, and what they can enjoy?

And I think that's one of the barriers that we have at the moment, is that people don't really know how to take those first steps. So {as a solution}, the toolkit is going to have some stakeholder mapping in it, which just helps you to go 'Okay these are some of the bigger organisations, how might we think about how we can filter down to the local ones?'.

Non-departmental public body

Several interviewees spoke about a lack of (and/or limitations to) the available guidance for engagement in their organisation (PR01, PR16, PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37). Linking with section 6.3, a lack of adequate guidance through the entire process of engagement could lead to staff lacking confidence and skills to conduct engagement. For example, PR36 (below) described how, to their knowledge, there was no official process of best practice guidelines that are used for engagement in their team (resulting in staff often relying on knowledge gained from UK professional standards). However, PR36 reflects that more clarity around engagement roles, responsibilities, and guidelines had improved the culture of reporting cases and promoting joined-up working in their organisation.

PR36: […] There are no official guidelines on how we communicate with people. Saying that, though, […] We're all bound by the codes of conduct, or the Regulation Authority that says things like, you know, "Don't be an idiot to one another in correspondence', you know, like don't be rude or things like that. […] But I guess, what I'm saying is there's professional standards, and I only know that we have to meet those, and are expected to meet those, and that sets a sort of context for how we interact with people, maybe.

Interviewer: How might you identify cases, then, which could 'blow up' […]?

PR36: Yeah, a hunch a lot of the time. I mean, I think we've got a lot better in the last two years […]. There's a much better culture of reporting cases now, and joining up in how we do that, as well. The creation of the […] {name of} team really, really, helps because that's the place where the high-profile cases go. […] So that's working better than it has before.

Non-departmental public body

Building on the above quote, PR36 describes some specific legal considerations which need to be incorporated into engagement guidance. In these situations, the engagement process is statutory and must follow strict legal guidelines. Litigation around stakeholder engagement is a complex area, with some regulations (i.e., those which define when, and how, engagement is conducted) being strict and others as more of a 'discretionary power'. Then, there are other laws around engagement which 'demand you consult people'; as PR36 describes below, you have to 'follow that process to the letter' and there is a 'legitimate expectation' that you conduct the process according to the principles of the law. These considerations would need to be reflected in any guidance and wider engagement strategy.

PR36: The Aarhus Convention is crucial here {in the context of engagement}, and the UK is a signatory to that, as well as the European Union. […]

{With regards to} public participation, for example […] You will see that there is a little unknown regulation which says 'you might want to consider consulting the public on your appropriate assessment' […] I don't think we do it when we're acting as a competent authority, but it's there, it's a discretionary power. […]

So, there are certain circumstances where the law demands you consult people. That'd be a statutory consultation process. And if you do that, you have to follow that process to the letter. […] There are certain circumstances when {public and stakeholder} consultation is advisable, or there is some sort of legitimate expectation that you do it.

Now, how you consult is a pretty well-established area of law, there is criteria called the Sedley principles that sets out how you do {engagement} from an early stage, sets out how you go about doing it.

Non-departmental public body

PR16 (below) talks about a lack of guidance around how to build and maintain trust with stakeholders, highlighting how it was important to have this training embedded in their organisation's strategy. While this point was made specifically about online techniques for engagement, they raise a more fundamental issue about the need for guidance on how to repair and rebuild trust with stakeholders, particularly when it has been damaged. This could involve guidance on developing the skills highlighted in section 6.3.2 (such as conflict management) and putting them into practice. This also links with themes which have been previously discussed, including the importance of fostering and maintaining trusting relationships with stakeholders (section 6.4.2).

> **PR16:** Nothing in {our} strategy really talks about digital online techniques, particularly because it was written 18 months ago and was really centred around doing face-to-face {engagement} and getting out to people, rather than it being an online consultation where there is none of that relationship building… You know, there is this issue around trust between farmers and [the organisation], you could say that it's at a bit of an all-time low… […] You know, the stakeholder engagement team have got a huge job to recreate and build that trust. So yeah, how they engage with people during this time of craziness {the COVID-19 pandemic} is really important, that we don't mess up and I feel like there is a danger of doing things wrong, because there's so much going on.
>
> *Government Department*

PR09 (below) reflects that organisations do not always have the adequate resources (e.g., funding and time) to provide guidance and support for engaging. They also highlight the important of utilising existing skills and expertise within the organisation, including key skills in the social sciences, to expand opportunities to engage (e.g., the importance of developing social science skills is discussed in more depth in section 6.3.2).

> **PR09:** {With regards to selecting engagement approaches} We do support and provide guidance in some ways to different projects. And if certain research projects are […] providing the opportunity to learn a bit more […] …we're all up for collaborating and understanding better what that means. But yeah, we don't necessarily have you know, we don't have sadly, pots of money to fund lots of different research. But of course, we do have our in-house social science team and, you know, some opportunity to get involved in that research.
>
> *Non-departmental public body*

Lack of training and resources (including time) was echoed by PR37, who shared their experiences regarding how to strategically embed more inclusive engagement practices in the organisation, explaining that this requires clear guidance and targets.

PR37: One of the things that came out of it is that people really want to be commissioned to do this {inclusivity and engagement} work, so they want to be told to do it, so rather than having an underlying theme of 'You must be inclusive in everything you do'... [...] And it's hard to translate what that really means. They wanted something a bit more concrete, which is happening this year, you know, we've got some clearer requirements and targets. […]

Non-departmental public body

In the quote below, PR22 describes how there not only needs to be clear guidance on how to do engagement, but there also needs to be minimum requirements on what level of engagement is conducted (e.g., more specific rules, regulations, and guidance which set out basic requirements for engagement). This point expands the discussion from organisational guidelines to the importance of guidelines and regulations that operate on a wider scale than single organisations (e.g., across sectors and regions). Although they discuss this issue within a planning and development context, PR22 raises a more fundamental issue regarding the gap between what is expected (or what is morally the 'right' thing to do) and what is legally required of the organisations carrying out the decision-making process.

PR22: […] In my mind, one of the biggest challenges is that in council's own statements of community involvement, you know, about how they're going to engage... There's no requirement on them to include a section on pre-application engagement by developers. And I really feel like, across the board, there should be. And I think it probably needs to be a space standard – "if you are delivering, or submitting a planning application, that is over this, as a bare minimum, you must have done this". You know, it doesn't have to be an onerous requirement, but it should, at least be there. […]

As a parish council, for example, we look at what our residents have said about planning applications – what do our residents think about it, as well as what we think? […] But there's no set parameters around this, it's completely up to the discretion of the planning authority which immediate neighbours they talk to. […] And there should be some bottom-level criteria, I think, a box that has to be ticked. And that should apply across the board, regardless of what you're doing.

Consultancy

Building on the above quote, PR22 adds that there should be a legal requirement for developers to engage with stakeholders at a basic level. To be successful in the long term, best practice engagement should involve some level of monitoring of compliance. For example, there should be an organisational (or national, regional, etc.) agreement on how progress and compliance is measured against best practice strategies (e.g. via an evaluation process). As PR22 implies, this might include some level of reprimand – such as a judicial review – to hold organisations accountable if they do not adhere to best practice requirements.

PR22: I mean, I've always felt it's been a shame that no one has ever taken a planning application to judicial review, on the basis that a council hasn't properly consulted neighbours, or on the basis that the developer hasn't properly consulted on it at pre-application. Because I just think you need someone to lay something down in that regard, to set out some parameters. You know, I think it's too easy to wriggle out of. Even if developers are not prepared to make changes, people should at least be aware of what's happening around them. And I know people say there's no right to review, but you know, just as a sort of general moral principle, if you live somewhere... You know, that's why I'm on my parish council, I live there and I want to know what's happening.

Consultancy

However, guidance and strategy must be realistically achievable – there are specific organisational constraints which can impact staff member's ability to conduct best practice engagement. For example, within the context of pre-application consultation, PR01 (below) describes how despite statutory requirements to conduct engagement, organisations to not necessarily have the resources and expertise to deliver best practice.

PR01: I think in terms of our work, initial consultations... I think a lot of developers have been, and we have also been, waiting for clarity and guidance from the Welsh Government. […] So, it's more sort of an early engagement thing, it's not a statutory process. So you see, when you're looking at pre-application consultations there's a statutory process, which is why we were waiting on Welsh Government guidance to be able to say that you meet the requirements. […] And I think quite often large agencies like the NRW {Natural Resources Wales} or Welsh Government, they talk the talk, but actually, they don't really have the expertise to go in and deliver that sort of engagement on the ground, if you know what I mean. But […] they're too involved with all the technical stuff to try and simplify it into layman's language, as it were.

Consultancy

The above quote introduces us to some of the key themes discussed in more depth in the following sections. To be successful in the long term, any engagement guidance should be adapted to suit both stakeholder and staff need, as well as broader organisational requirements. It is also important that engagement is adequately supported by skilled and experienced staff, such as those with dedicated roles.

6.6.2 Adapting to need

This section explores interviewees views on the importance of developing and implementing an engagement strategy which, instead of being prescriptive, can be adapted to the needs staff members in different parts of the organisation. It is also important to adapt engagement processes to stakeholder need, considering diverse requirements across different demographics and contexts (e.g., Chapter 5, section 5.4 explores this in more depth with regards to selecting appropriate online/offline methods for engagement). Interviewees highlighted the importance of recognising that different parts of their organisation will have different requirements and considerations for engagement (4 out of 24 interviewees[80]). Any organisational guidance and support should therefore be adapted with any unique considerations in mind.

PR37 (below) explains that staff have different requirements for engagement in different parts of their organisation, which means that guidance needs to be adapted to suit their needs. In the example the provide, staff can feel confused about where to start with the engagement process because “they’re not being told what to do”. PR37 explains that there is a risk of guidance being too prescriptive and not being applicable for staff across different areas of the organisation. Instead, it is important to work on engagement strategies internally, which should involve exploring how guidance can be adapted to the needs of staff members.

PR37: I think {staff are confused about what they need to do} because, I think partly because they’re not being told what to do, and quite often, you know, if we’re told to do something we usually find a way to do it. Because this {guidance} is less prescriptive, so because each {part of the organisation} is very different, we don’t want to say, “You must do this, you must do that” because it wouldn’t apply across the board. I think that one of the things that we can do is certainly work on our inclusion work internally, I think people understand that a bit better than how we communicate with our partners.

Non-departmental public body

Building on the above quote, PR37 (below) goes on to talk about how their work to embed inclusive practices in the organisation started with understanding staff need. This included

[80] Participant ID: PR36, PR37, PR27, PR16

understanding current practices, expertise, challenges, and opportunities that were experienced in different parts of the organisation.

PR37: So, we structured it around looking at what people are already doing to be inclusive and having a conversation around that. We've been using {Google} Jamboard to capture all the comments, so we've got quite a lot of evidence from that. Then we looked at what opportunities do people have to do more {inclusivity} work, or what would like to do, and what challenges do they face. And then we looked at what they need to move forwards. So this is really feeding {into} our toolkits, so we've kind of going "Look, we've talked to you, this is what you've said you want, and this is what we're putting in our toolkit as a result of what you've said", which is quite a nice way of doing it rather than just assuming what people want.

Non-departmental public body

Different parts of organisations can experience different barriers for understanding key information and guidance for engagement (PR36, PR37, PR27), which can impact both staff members and stakeholders. The quotes below highlight the importance of understanding that some organisations, and areas within organisations, will be dealing with different knowledge requirements (e.g., ecologists or planners). Staff members conducting the engagement process may not have the skillset, time, and/or resources to translate this information into something that is accessible to a lay audience. Therefore, it is important to recognise this need and adapt guidance and support for engagement accordingly.

For example, PR36 describes how the technical nature of their work can exclude some stakeholders, as key documents are written in a way that can only be understood by specialists.

PR36: I think that the biggest problem in this area is that when Joe Bloggs turns up to a public enquiry, they can't participate in it, because all that matters is the technical language of the consultant ecologists. You're dealing with material and applications that are thousands of pages and constantly changing over time, to different issues. Not only is the content of this very technical and scientific, the legal tests that apply are quite technical too, it's quite a specialist area of law, so you have people talking in a specialist language about specialist tests, so people find it very hard to understand and to engage. For example, I have never been able to explain what I do to my dad – how environmental law works, and what my role is in it – he shows willing but can't understand it. So, people turn up to an enquiry and have no idea what's going on.

Non-departmental public body

PR37 (below) describes how the sheer volume of information (e.g., what to do and how to do it), as well as lack of available time for staff to understand it, can be a barrier to carrying out best practice engagement. PR37 highlights the importance of having clear, accessible, and succinct information is essential to provide staff with the information and guidance they need to conduct best practice engagement.

PR37: […] I was {working in a leadership role} and there's always so much going on {and} you don't have time to trawl through loads of stuff. So, what we want to do is on the front page {of inclusive engagement guidance} is have an area for managing {the role}, to just kind of go 'What do I need to know? Oh, boom, it's there, and I can just go and access it.'.

So, I'm just doing a bit of a consultation with our {managerial} network, finding out what people actually want to know, {then they can} click their fingers {and find out} what they need to know. So, yeah. And then that will be pulled together into one easy package.

Non-departmental public body

For PR27 (below), technical jargon in the planning sector can be a barrier to understanding key information and guidance, like environment impact statements. This information can be confusing, lengthy, and not adequately signposted.

PR27: […] The planning process is very opaque, and there's a lot of jargon in planning that we all lapse into without really realising. You know, I was on the council in London […] and we had some major regeneration schemes […]. I was quite seriously involved in quite a lot of big deals. I didn't realise before this work how much work goes into a planning application. Because as a councillor, all you see is the planning report, which Is 50 pages long at most, you don't see 37 files about environmental impact statements, and bird studies, and all that stuff. You just don't see it. It's referred to in the reports if you read it really carefully.

Consultancy

The data in this section suggests that any engagement advice, guidance, tools, training, and other resources (e.g., those described in section 6.3) must be flexible and adaptable to the context and purpose in which it is needed. PR37 (below) illustrates the importance of having case studies to show how best practice guidance can be delivered on-the-ground in the context of the organisation's work. This can help make confusing or intangible elements of guidance and advice more 'real' by clearly demonstrating how engagement can be done, what the benefits could be, and how to mitigate the risks.

PR37: […] I think that's what we've been trying to help people understand. I think people are still a bit confused about actually what we want them to do {with engagement and inclusion}. And so one of the things we're going to have in the toolkit is a set of case studies, which gives people opportunities to say "Okay, well what can I do in my role?". So we'll have some case studies and stories about where people have been working with diverse groups […]. But then, it's also {about} people finding time to do these things. That's always a bit tricky.

Non-departmental public body

The data in this section so far has emphasised the need to adapt the engagement process to different contexts including different areas in the organisation, staff requirements, and the needs of stakeholders. The quote below builds on this discussion by highlighting the need to adapt as things change, or as new considerations emerge, during the engagement process. This adaptability requires long-term planning, foresight, and strategy for engagement, which is explored more depth in the next section.

PR16 (below) describes the importance of matching methods and approaches to the decision-making context. PR16 highlights the importance of understanding the time and resource constraints for projects, emphasising the importance of matching methods to specific requirements. Embedding a long-term engagement strategy is essential to this. In the situation below, understanding requirements (and adapting methods to this context) was particularly important when engagement and decision-making processes can change rapidly and unexpectedly according to current policy directions. PR16 reflects that the (sometimes very lengthy) timeframe and resource commitment for doing best practice engagement does not always "match-up" to the short-term policy decision-making climate. Although the quote below is reflecting on the importance of online methods for engagement specifically, PR16 makes a more fundamental point about the importance of being realistic and "matching up" engagement approaches to decision-making timeframes.

PR16: Yeah, also if you're gonna do engagement […] doing quite a lot of travelling, and taking a team of people out to do these workshops. It takes quite a lot of planning, you know, booking venues, and really, you need a long-term strategy to your engagement and your plan. You know, "over six months, this is what we're gonna do. This is who we're going to talk to, and when we're going to do it, and how we're going to do it". But actually, in six months, in terms of policy development, is really long. So, you almost can't organise it quick enough for it to then to meaningfully feed in the right time, you know, to feed into those key policy decisions, because there's hardly any contingency and if, you know, one thing changes, then it throws your whole timetable off.

PR16: […] And so I'm hoping that will actually be a real benefit of being able to do stuff online, that we can get feedback much quicker when we need it, at those key time points. Because often it isn't married up, we've got this plan, there could be a really key policy question and "Oh, we really need to engage around this question". Then by the time it comes to deep engagement, it's lost its momentum somehow, often it's quite rare when that really matches up. That's frustrating, but maybe online {engagement tools} could help with that, essentially.

UK Government department

The above quote highlights the importance of adapting the engagement process to the context and requirements of both participants and staff members. This is explored in more detail in the section below.

The data presented in section 6.6 so far has explored the importance of having clear guidance and support for engagement. This must be adapted to the changing needs of organisations, their staff members, and key stakeholders. However, the data in the next section shows that having clear guidance is not an effective strategy for ensuring successful engagement on its own. To be successful in the long term, any engagement process needs to be part of a long-term and consistent organisational strategy, with clear ambitions, goals, and targets.

6.6.3 Long-term goals and ambition

This section explores the importance of recognising that embedding engagement is a slow process which requires consistency, clear goals and ambition. Although the vast majority of interviewees spoke about the importance of embedding engagement in the strategy, goals, and mission of their organisations, this was mostly discussed with regards to digital engagement in particular (see Chapter 5). This section focuses on participants who offered specific insights into how engagement could be (further) embedded in their organisation (7 out of 24 interviewees[81]). The following quotes bring the themes in all of the previous sections in this chapter together, reflecting on the importance of embedding engagement practices in an organisation over time, and what this might look like.

[81] Participant ID: PR25, PR35a, PR35b, PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39

In the quote below, PR38 summarises the importance of empowering staff to do engagement (e.g., linking to section 6.3) as well as embedding engagement as a fundamental part of the work that the organisation does.

PR38: I think it's empowering staff as well to do it {engagement}. […] it's sort of... It's all often an add on to what we do, it's not part of what we do, it's an add on. […] And I think it needs to be it... It's about embedding it as a fundamental part of the work that we need to do as {an organisation} providing a public service, essentially.

Non-departmental public body

For PR38 (below), the long-term success of engagement in their organisation requires more joined-up thinking, a coherent plan and ambition. In the first part of the quote, PR38 explains how there's a lack of joined-up thinking across different parts of the organisation, which makes it difficult to consistently embed engagement practices. When devising a long-term plan for engagement, it is also essential to consider stakeholder need – how does the organisational ambition for engagement work to meet stakeholder's own ambitions? This links to themes discussed in the previous section (6.6.2) which address the importance of adapting engagement strategy to organisational, staff, and stakeholder need. PR38 then emphasises that having a coherent, consistent organisational plan for engagement also involves recognising the different approaches to engagement that exist across the organisation (e.g., within different teams and projects, or in relation to engaging with different stakeholders). However, they reflect that the different approaches within the organisation can make it difficult to know whose responsibility it is to engage (linking to section 6.2.2). They conclude by reiterating the need for a coherent and consistent engagement plan and/or organisational strategy. This must involve joined-up thinking that embraces the diverse approaches to, and experiences of, engagement across the organisation.

PR38: […] There's a lot of change in this work area at the moment, in terms of staff, and ambition, and policy. And that's just within {the organisation}. And I think that is making it quite difficult to know whose responsibility it is to […] take the lead on some of that engagement work. So, there's something about a bit of a lack of join up I think at the moment, internally, which is making {embedding engagement} quite difficult. And also, the lack of a coherent plan around some of this, a longer-term plan in terms of our ambition, and tying that up with what that looks like in terms of our engagement with all of these different {stakeholder} groups. […] So, you've got {people who are} thinking about this really broad, high-level strategy for the organisation where we really need to have a plan associated with that. But then there are {also} lots of individuals who will have their own plans, which might be in relation to a project, or […] to a key group of stakeholders.

Non-departmental public body

Building on the above quote, PR38 reflects on the importance of the leadership team acknowledging the value of engagement and supporting a culture change from the top down. However, PR38 explains how a culture shift does not just require top-down action – it requires improving the confidence of staff in their skillset for engaging (linking with section 6.3); enhancing the tools, methods, and guidance (linking with Chapter 5, also section 6.6.1). PR38 concludes by saying that their organisation needs to empower staff to engage, which could involve giving them the agency to carry out best practice (section 6.5), as well as improving skills and reducing confidence around engaging and managing relationships with stakeholders (e.g., section 6.4.2).

Interviewer: It feels to me like... […] there is a culture shift happening away from like, as you said {PR38}, the "No, you must not talk to people" kind of thing... But I suppose it's recognising that that's a journey, and it's not going to happen overnight […].

PR38: Yeah, it does, but it's interesting because it's what we've done with evaluation, isn't it, it's what the organisation has managed to achieve, finally… I suppose, the difference is […] We have got a better leadership team […] that really does show that they think this {engagement} is an important thing to do, so I think they will be really supportive of turning this around, so hopefully it can happen a little bit quicker.

PR38: […] I think all it {a culture shift towards engagement} needs is a plan, isn't it, the confidence of people, the tools, and the empowerment. And I think if you if that can be provided in a sensible way, then I think most people would be up for this.

Non-departmental public body

PR25 (below) described the importance of engagement being at the heart of strategic decision-making in their organisation. In this example, engagement strategy is initiated and supported from the top-down, however stakeholders (e.g., members of local communities) are engaged in establishing the organisation's priorities. Here, the level of engagement ranges from consultation (e.g., engagement which the organisation has a legal responsibility to conduct) to co-production (e.g., co-producing key services and outcomes with stakeholders).

PR25:	Yeah, so participation and engagement is a big strategic priority for the council. The council as a whole has three strategic priorities […] one is participation and engagement […]. You could break that down as: people, place, participation. Those are the three big strategic priorities that the core of the Council, the bit of the council that I work for, has set out over the last year or so. So participation and engagement, in other words, working with residents, and all the rest of it, is absolutely at the heart of our strategic agenda. It's a big strategic priority for the council. I suppose the distinction I am drawing is that, as the core of the council, in other words, as the bit of the council that sets strategy and kind of commissions, we will only ever engage residents in the setting out of our priorities. In terms of the kind of engagement we are committed to, it's the full spectrum, if you like. All the way from what might be considered slightly more traditional consultation, you know, the stuff that councils have a legal responsibility to do. Obviously, we will do that, and we're committed to it. But we also think it's critically important that residents are working with us to kind of co-design our strategies. And we think it's really important that residents are working with us to co-produce services and outcomes.

Local authority

Other interviewees expressed the need for more proactive, rather than reactive, engagement across the organisation (PR35a, PR35b, PR36). In the quote below, PR36 describes a lack of forward planning and proactive engagement (which involves "stakeholder management") in their organisation. This can be an issue because by the time the staff are engaging, stakeholders can have already formed entrenched views about the project/decision (e.g., linking with section 6.4, particularly section 6.4.1, which explores challenges managing stakeholder opposition). Instead of carefully planning and engaging with stakeholders early on in the process, PR36 reflects that their current approach in the organisation is too reactive.

PR36:	What I don't think we do, what I know we don't do, is engage ourselves with proper stakeholder management. We're kind of reacting to, or dealing with, a particular case. And usually when things get to the point where we're involved, there are quite entrenched positions. And when litigation is happening, then it's very difficult to pull back the relationship at that stage. Because entrenched positions have been taken, you know, unfortunately.
Interviewer:	Do you mean very strong opinions…?
PR36:	Oh, yeah, oh for sure. Yeah, either because the claimant fully believes we're wrong, and maybe they're right, you know, like, we're not infallible, we do get things wrong. So maybe they're right and they're pressing that point. Or, because they believe deeply in it, and invest in it, it's like gamblers fallacy... the more you invest in it, you put keep on putting more

and more into it, and when the counter arguments come in from us, you know, you're not sort of looking at that in an open-minded sense, they're selecting from things which affirm their worldview.

So, it's all quite reactive.

Non-departmental public body

For PR35a (below), embedding engagement practices was not just about forward planning and engaging with stakeholders early on in the process. Any long-term goals and ambition for engagement requires adequate funding, which PR35a explains they do not have enough of (e.g., linking to the issues raised in section 6.2.1 regarding resource limitations and the impact on engagement). Lack of funding and other essential resources makes it difficult to know what the output, or outcome, of engagement might be (and how to get there), which impacts staff member's ability to plan the engagement process properly.

PR35a: […] And I think that the biggest problem, out of everything that we've just been talking about {in this interview}, is that it all sounds really positive. Apart from, we're not able to come at this saying to people, "we can put some solutions in place and these are the these are the different solutions that we're choosing between", because at the moment, we don't have any mechanism to solve this problem, and any mechanism that we do have is going to cost a lot of money, and we don't have that money, and we don't know where that money would come from. So, everything that that you're saying, everything that we've discussed today, sounds brilliant. But the problem is we actually don't have a solution, and so that's quite difficult to sell to people as well, I think. Definitely, we should think about how we approach people, and what we're saying to them, and like describing what we're trying to achieve here, but really, we should be looking at an end result of "this is what we can do to make the situation better" and actually, it's still really difficult to see what that end result could be, and how we could make that happen.

Non-departmental public body

Several participants described how embedding engagement, which could require an organisational culture change, was a slow process which takes time (PR36, PR37, PR38, PR39). For example, PR37 (below) highlights the importance of having an organisational goal to work towards. This requires having guidance (or a toolkit) which is not prescriptive (e.g., linking to the themes discussed in 6.6.1 regarding guidance) but helps to embed consistent practices across the organisation.

As PR37 explains, this guidance should guide staff to the "right places", which could involve signposting staff to key resources (e.g., those discussed in section 6.2) and training opportunities to develop key skills (e.g., 6.3). Linking to section 6.3.3, is also important to have dedicated members of staff in supporting roles, for example PR37 aims to ensure that senior leaders are available to advocate their inclusivity goals to other members of staff.

Interviewer: I guess, the end goal would be an organisation wide culture of being inclusive?

PR37: Yeah, so that's the idea, that this {inclusivity and engagement} toolkit will not be a manual, but it will help people to realise that this isn't going away, and that we're being really serious about it, {and} if they need help, then it will be able to guide them to the right places. And what we want is for some of our senior leaders, and various EDI {equality, diversity, and inclusion} groups, to really advocate this, to make sure people are thinking about it. So yes, the overall wish, or the overall intent, is that we will become a much more inclusive organisation.

Non-departmental public body

Following from the above quote, PR37 (below) makes the point that to be an inclusive and engaging organisation also requires them to be representative of the communities (and other stakeholders) that they work for. For PR37, more visibility of, and commitment to, being inclusive is one part of what is needed to embed engagement in their organisational culture.

PR37: One of the key things that has come up every time, […] is if we're going to be an inclusive organisation, we need to be able to represent the communities that we serve, and currently we have very few colleagues who are from minority backgrounds. And I'm not actually sure about our disabilities {representation}, either. So, I think we recognise that there's a long way to go there. But we are making small steps, you know, in our recruitment […].

So yeah, I think things are changing, they're just changing very slowly. So I think what the hope is that, with a bit more visibility about being inclusive, and a bit more of a push from the senior leaders, that it will start to just embed itself in our culture.

Non-departmental public body

In another quote, PR37 reflects that sometimes changes in the organisation have been met with resistance from staff. However, over time these changes become the "normal thing to do" – in other words, they become embedded in the organisation as part of a culture change.

PR37: There have been things that {our organisation} has tried to do in the past that people have been very resistant to. For example, a few years ago we brought in charging for our services, which we'd never done before, and people were up in arms – "We can't possibly charge somebody for doing this!", you know. […] For a long time, there was this like, "Oh god, I couldn't possibly do that" and then a few people tried it, and then a few more people tried, and then {they discovered} it's not that difficult, and then now…. I don't know how many years it's been going on, probably about four or five years maybe. Now it's a normal thing to do.

Non-departmental public body

PR37 also recognises that embedding engagement takes time and dedication. Initiating and sustaining a culture change is a slow process, not quick changes which "happen overnight". It is important for the organisation, and their members of staff, to recognise this and to take the first steps to start the change.

PR37: Yeah, but it's {embedding engagement} going to take time. I think that's one of the things that […] you know, the oil tanker that moves really slowly. It's not going to be overnight, but what we can do is we can just make a start. And I think that's one of the things that's come out of our {engagement sessions with organisation staff}, is that people recognise that it's not going to happen overnight, but we need to start doing something about it now to make a change. To start that change.

Non-departmental public body

6.7. Conclusion

To be successful in the long term, effective (what interviewees often described as 'best practice') stakeholder engagement needs to be institutionalised. However, there are different challenges and opportunities for carrying out and embedding best practice in organisations. The themes in this chapter have all been identified as relevant to organisational issues and constraints as experienced by the research participants. These themes are fundamental, but not unique to, the findings relating to digital engagement in Chapter 5. The findings of this chapter can be used to develop evidence-led considerations for organisations looking to embed (and maintain) a culture of engagement. The central message in this chapter is that there are some common themes, which describe the challenges and opportunities for conducting best practice engagement, which are common to diverse organisations across the environment and planning sector. There is clearly a lot of potential for organisations to share learning and work together to promote best practice, however there will also likely be considerations which are unique to organisations and sectors. As part of strategies for embedding engagement, organisations should investigate whether the considerations highlighted in this chapter are relevant for them (or whether there might be additional considerations which need exploring). The findings of this chapter are brought together with the findings in the previous empirical chapter, as well as the themes identified in the research, to discuss some key themes for institutionalising engagement in Chapter 7.

Chapter 7: Discussion: Practitioners' perspectives on effective engagement.

7.1 Introduction

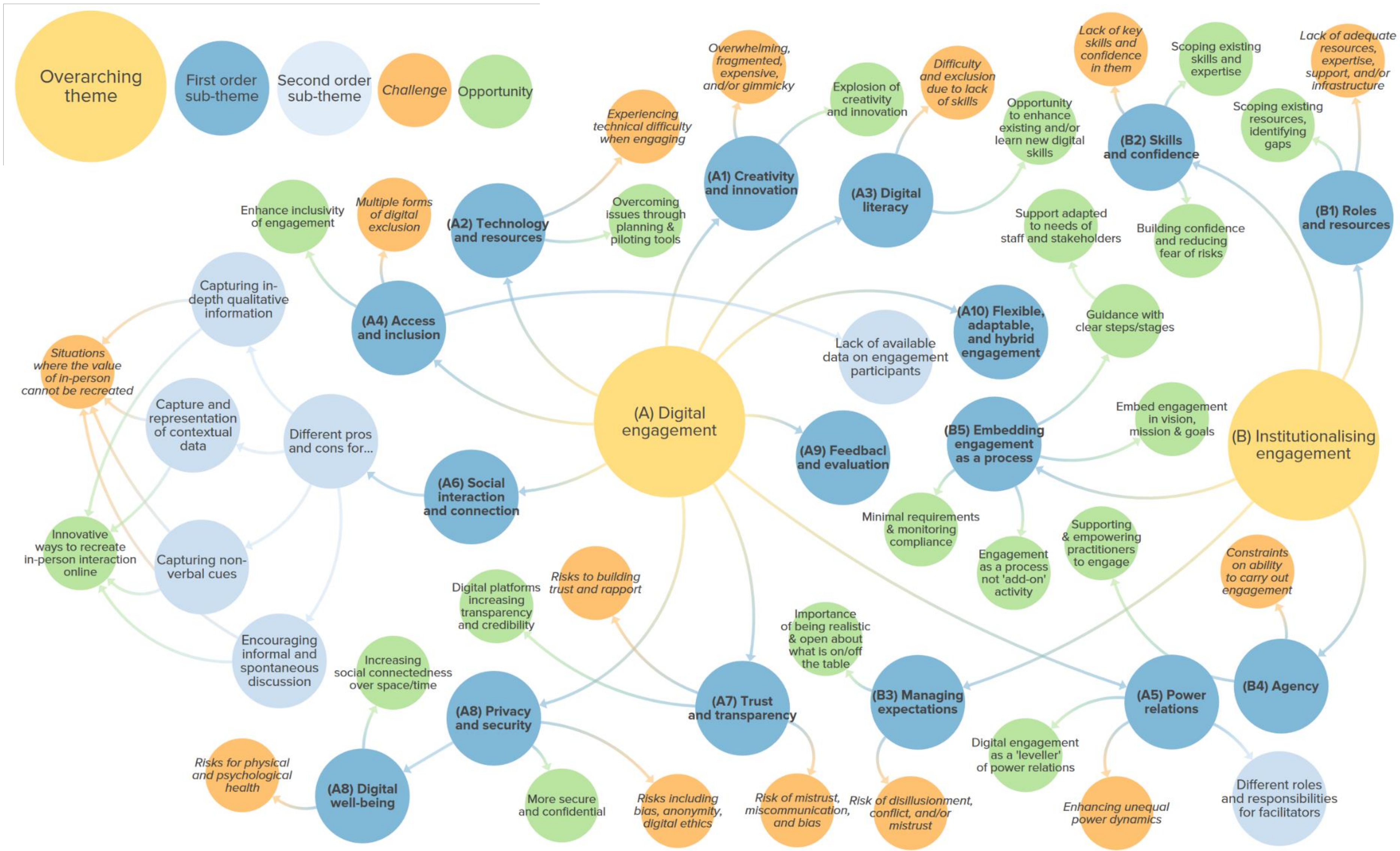
This chapter elaborates on the findings presented in the empirical chapters and discusses their significance and implications within the context of the wider literature. Public and stakeholder engagement processes are complex, dynamic, and highly context dependent. There are fundamental contextual factors that shape the goals and outcomes of engagement (e.g., power, social dynamics, trust, inclusivity) that can take on new dimensions in digital and remote environments. There are also a variety of complex organisational and institutional factors that can work to enable and/or constrain the effectiveness of engagement, which are rooted in organisational structures and cultures. Building on this knowledge, conceptual contributions can be made to gaps in existing theories and models for explaining what works for engagement. This chapter explores these issues through a discussion of the key findings from the previous two empirical chapters. In doing so, it responds to the aims of the thesis: to understand practitioners' perspectives on what works for effective stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes in the UK.

This chapter first discusses practitioners' perspectives[82] of the effectiveness of digital tools for meeting the goals and benefits of engagement (e.g., see Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Willis *et al.,* 2018) (research question one). The chapter then considers the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising effective strategies for engagement (e.g., Baker and Chapin, 2018; Pallett and Chilvers, 2013; Wesselink et al., 2011) (research question two). Finally, this chapter brings together the knowledge revealed by the previous two discussions to explore what contributions can be made to theories and models that help to explain what works for engagement (Bell and Reed, 2021; Reed *et al.,* 2018a) (research question three).

[82] As stated in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3), the practitioners interviewed as part of this study are referred to as 'practitioners' and/or 'engagers' where appropriate (inclusive of both practitioner and practice enabler interviewees, see Chapter 3, section 3.4). The word 'participants' is used to refer to the public and stakeholder groups who are (or could be) involved in engagement processes.

Figure 22 presents themes that are linked to subheadings (main themes) in this chapter: section 7.2 (digital engagement) and its sub-sections (sub-themes) are labelled A, A1, A2, and so forth; section 7.3 (institutionalising engagement) and its sub-sections are labelled B, B1, B2, and so forth. In the diagram, the main themes (A and B) are coloured light yellow and in large circles, the sub-themes in blue/light blue and medium sized circles, and various challenges and opportunities are shown in orange (challenge) and green (opportunity) small circles. Some themes that are considered to be closely linked (e.g., digital literacy in section 7.2.3 and skills and confidence in section 7.3.2) are positioned close together in the diagram. The purpose of Fig. 22 is to show some of the ways that the themes can fit together (it would be impossible to demonstrate all links) and reinforce the complex picture that they present. This diagram is therefore intended to be illustrative rather than provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors discussed in this chapter and how they are interlinked.

Figure 22. A thematic visualisation of the discussion of the findings. *Source: original diagram by the author.*



7.2 Key considerations for effective digital engagement

The existing literature has identified that technology is continuously transforming public and stakeholder engagement in research, policy, and practice (Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Rawat and Yusuf, 2019; Rowe and Gammack, 2004; Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021, 2022). However, there remain many unresolved questions about the effectiveness of digital tools in delivering on the goals and benefits of engagement (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Hafferty *et al*., forthcoming; Willis *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has added urgency to the question of whether inclusive, representative, and meaningful engagement can be conducted effectively in online settings. While digital tools can enhance engagement, they can have negative consequences which can lead to (further) exclusion, marginalisation, and disempowerment of engagement participants. There are also a range of risks and potential negative consequences for those carrying out engagement processes using digital tools, including for practitioners and the organisations that they work in. The empirical findings in Chapter 5 included the technical and ethical debates around digital engagement and a range of factors including access and inclusion, digital literacy, power relations, trust and transparency, privacy and security, accountability, digital well-being, among others (see Figure 22). The following sections discuss how the factors that influence the outcomes of engagement take on new dimensions in digital and remote environments (responding to research question one: *'How effective are digital tools for meeting the goals and benefits of engagement?'*).

7.2.1 Creativity and innovation

The research found that the pandemic initiated a wave of experimentation (e.g., Willis *et al.,* 2021) that exposed new[83] opportunities for more creative and innovative digital engagement. (see also Chapter 5, section 5.2.1). Ultimately, the findings highlight a disruption to the status quo of engagement practices, encouraging and accelerating the uptake of different, often more

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[83] As discussed in the literature review, it is important to remember that while the pandemic accelerated the adoption and deployment of novel and innovative digital technologies, digital participatory approaches have been developing for decades (supported by a well-established body of evidence, e.g., Conroy and Evans-Cowley, 2006; de Silva, 2015; Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Rawat and Yusuf, 2019; Rowe and Gammack, 2004; Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones, 2022). Although the findings of this study focus on the changes and adaptations during the pandemic, many interviewees had been using digital tools for engagement before the pandemic. As such, this research does not make any broad or generic claims about digital engagement being a 'new' approach for all engagers in the study. Instead, the main finding is that practitioners were employing *different* approaches for engagement during the pandemic (vs pre-pandemic), which involved using more creative, innovative, and diverse approaches using multimodal and multimedia technologies.

creative and innovative approaches to the pre-pandemic norm[84]. For example, practitioners described lockdown as 'a bit of a shake-up […] and it's kind of highlighted that all of these things are possible' (PR11, university), that it had 'changed the paradigm of communication' (PR15) and 'broadened our armoury of engagement tools' (PR23, local authority). This aligns with the literature which explores the impacts of the disruption caused by the pandemic on stakeholder engagement and other participatory processes (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Bricout *et al.*, 2021; Manderscheid *et al.*, 2022; Pantić *et al.*, 2021; Sattler *et al.*, 2022; Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021), highlighting an array of innovative digital technologies being used in planning and environmental decision-making arenas in the UK and beyond.

The majority of practitioners described how they had discovered and implemented digital approaches for engagement which they had not previously used. In particular, engagers described the benefits and drawbacks of using diverse multimodal and multimedia technologies[85]. This included digital participatory mapping approaches with layers of data and multimedia pop-ups (e.g., including drop-pin comments, photographs, audio, etc.), interactive web-based 'hubs' with links to different forms of communication (message boards, social media, polling, maps, etc.), and videoconferencing platforms with diverse audio-visual features (see Falco and Kleinhans, 2018b; Golledge *et al.*, 2006; Kleinhans *et al.*, 2021).

On one hand, engagement practitioners felt that using an array of different tools and media was beneficial for creating more interactive, inclusive, and captivating experiences for participants (also see Golledge *et al.*, 2006; Licoppe and Morel, 2012; Phan, 2011). As one practitioner (PR25, local authority) commented: 'the more creative we can be with those things {digital technologies} the better'. According to Golledge *et al*. (2006), the utility of multimodal interfaces includes representing and accessing (local) geographic information, enhancing accessibility, bridging the digital divide, and enriching understandings of complex information (also see e.g., Taylor *et al.*, 2020; Tomkins and Lange, 2019). The findings demonstrated how multimedia and multimodal digital tools can offer novel and interactive ways to capture diverse local perspectives and facilitate in-depth understandings of local issues. For example, practitioners highlighted the benefits of online geospatial tools to facilitate participation (also known as 'geoparticipation' – see Pánek, 2016), particularly digital participatory mapping and

[84] It is important to be clear that the words 'new', 'creative', and 'innovative' (etc.) are used because they were terms frequently used by engagers. This means that some digital tools were new/creative/innovative to the engagers compared to their engagement activity before the pandemic, and it does not necessarily mean that the tools were newly developed and/or implemented technologies in general.

[85] Multimodal technologies are understood as lots of different modes of doing engagement, and multimedia technologies refers to technologies that use more than one expression of digital communication (e.g., audio, textual, and visual media).

landscape visualisation technologies (e.g., Smith *et al.*, 2019). Others described the benefits of using videoconferencing platforms alongside other digital tools (e.g., polling software, gamified techniques, instant messaging) to enable both synchronous and asynchronous feedback (see Hampel and Stickler, 2012; Licoppe and Morel, 2012, Mualam *et al.*, 2022).

On the other hand, the research highlighted several risks related to the use of multimodal and multimedia technologies including lack of interoperability, overwhelming participants and engagers, and digital fatigue (other research supports these findings, for example see Le Blanc, 2020; Thompson, 2016). The findings warned against selecting digital tools based on the lure of novel and exciting technologies (and the marketing strategies used by engagement software companies), rather than their practical useability and appropriateness in a given context. Practitioners described some technologies as too complex, unfamiliar, or even 'gimmicky' and reflected on the fact that more low-tech options can be more appropriate to use with particular participants in some situations (also see Leys and Vanclay, 2011). To illustrate this point, while digital technologies were described as 'cool', 'innovative' and 'exciting' on one hand, on the other hand it was important to consider the purpose of engaging and whether low-tech methods could be more effective. For example, one engager commented on the issues associated with digital-first approaches to engagement without carefully considering the goals/objectives of using digital tools in the first place: '{Engagers} think "oh, this is really cool!" rather than saying, "why are we using it?"' (PR02, education). Many of these issues have been recognised in the literature: an OECD report suggested that online engagement should not be offered as a 'sci-fi gimmick' (OECD, 2003 p.151) and decision-makers should be committed to ensuring meaningful, genuine, and responsive processes. More recently, Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones (2021) comment that digital technology is not an 'add-on gimmick' and digital planning processes 'must be a visible and meaningful endeavour that creates proactive possibilities for and through an enhanced democratic process' (2021 p. 248). Ultimately, while there are many benefits for creative and innovative digital tools for engagement, the findings call for a more realistic assessment of their use to match the context and purpose in which they are needed.

7.2.2 Technology and resources

The research findings highlighted various technical issues including setup and accessibility issues, poor quality connection and drop-outs, outdated hardware and/or limited functionality, lack of access to equipment and/or support using it, poor video and audio quality, limited mobile phone and/or WiFi signal, low device battery, among others. Technical issues were linked to the (in)accessibility of digital engagement processes, the quality of dialogue, and can lead to other unintended negative consequences such as participant fatigue and increased dropouts. These findings were consistent with the literature, including a range of papers which emerged in response to changes and adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Archibald *et al.*, 2019; Boland *et al.*, 2021*;* Butler *et al.* 2020; Falter *et al.*, 2022; Hall *et al.*, 2021; McKinley *et al.*, 2021).

The research also demonstrated how technical issues may be overcome by careful planning, testing and/or trialling software. Practitioners suggested that trial runs and/or training sessions can provide time for both participants and engagers to familiarise themselves with how digital tools operate, which can in turn help to build confidence and digital skills. This is consistent with Marzi (2021), who found that allowing time for training participants to use online participatory video approaches helped participants to engage more comfortably and on their own terms, developing their confidence and skills throughout the process. The shared experience of collectively resolving technical issues may also help to build trust and rapport between participants and engagers (e.g., see Archibald *et al.,* 2021). This was a finding in this research, with some engagers reflecting that having a trial run before an engagement session not only helped to check that participants were able to use digital tools (e.g., that they have the skills and resources required), but also worked as an icebreaker to foster informal conversation and build relationships with participants (also see Falter *et al.*, 2022).

7.2.3 Digital literacy and confidence

The research highlighted important skills needed for digital engagement, exploring instances where the level of digital literacy amongst participants and/or engagers (and their confidence in these skills) could include or exclude them from the engagement process. While there was an increased opportunity to learn new digital skills during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., using how to use novel software tools more effectively), lack of digital skills and confidence posed a barrier to the accessibility and inclusiveness of engagement (see also Boland *et al.*, 2021; Chivers *et al.*, 2021; Kindred *et al.*, 2021; McKinley *et al.*, 2021). For example, in their study of the impact of 'going digital' during COVID-19 in the context of community and stakeholder engagement in UK coastal communities, McKinley *et al*. (2021) found challenges associated with engaging individuals with limited digital literacy, who were less likely to engage with online/digital experiences and events. They reflect that lack of digital skills and confidence (in combination with an array of technical and ethical barriers) could result in segments of the community becoming 'more excluded from digital engagement as the transition to digital engagement tools prioritises access to broadband and marginalises those who lack confidence or experience of working online' (McKinley *et al*., 2021 p. 7).

While much of this literature explores the impacts of 'going digital' on engagement participants (and/or potential participants), engagers' views and experiences are currently underexplored (Lachapelle *et al.*, 2003; Wesselink *et al.*, 2011). The research findings contributed to the existing knowledge base of practitioners' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of stakeholder engagement, focusing on the specific skills and resources needed to use digital tools. For example, practitioners highlighted how they had learnt new digital skills during the pandemic, as well as situations where their lack of confidence or even fear of engaging online had been a barrier for them. The results provided an insight into what practitioners perceived to be within their own comfort zones with regards to carrying out digital engagement, and how adequately they were supported to build skills and confidence engaging by their organisations. The importance of building staff's skills and confidence to engage as part of a broader organisational strategy is explored in section 7.3.

7.2.4 Access and inclusion

The findings of the research were consistent with the literature on the challenges and opportunities of digital engagement: although digital tools enhance the inclusiveness of engagement processes on one hand (Hasler *et al.*, 2017), they can create barriers and make it more difficult for some groups and individuals to engage on the other (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018; McSweeney *et al.*, 2022; Møller and Olafsson, 2018; Pham and Massey, 2018). Digital technology can expand the so-called 'digital divide' (Davis and Farmer, 2018; Huggins and Izushi, 2002; Panganiban, 2019) and (further) marginalise people based on socio-economic factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability, education, and income. While these issues underpin and impact upon all engagement processes (i.e., regardless of the in-person or digital approach), the research found that there were some specific considerations for digital engagement. One key message from the research was that in almost every situation where digital engagement helped to include people in some situations, there was another situation where people were digitally excluded.

Practitioners described a variety of situations where digital engagement was perceived to be more inclusive of participants. The reasons included reduced time and resource constraints (e.g., reducing the need to travel), as well as enabling engagement participants, and those responsible for engaging, to engage more flexibly and in their own time (e.g., facilitating asynchronous engagement). Practitioners reported that, compared to their 'usual' in-person engagement before the pandemic, digital tools helped to reach wider audiences (e.g., reaching people over wider geographic locations and time zones) and/or included more diverse groups and individuals (e.g., with different demographics and backgrounds than usual for in-person engagement). These findings were consistent with the opportunities and potentials for digital engagement in planning and environmental decision-making settings (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Hafferty, 2022; Hafferty *et al.,* forthcoming; Møller and Olafsson, 2018), as well as for online qualitative, participatory, and deliberative approaches more generally (e.g., Sattler *et al.*, 2022; Willis *et al.*, 2021). For example, Willis *et al.* (2021) found that accessibility and inclusion issues were substantively different for online deliberative research compared to in-person, suggesting that convening online may make events more accessible for some because travel is not required.

At the same time, practitioners described digital exclusions including lack of access to the internet, inadequate IT hardware and infrastructure, poor device memory and processing power, and lack of a suitable space to engage at home. Digital exclusions overlapped with many of the other themes included in this section (7.2), for example, one practitioner spoke about how they felt that some participants lacked the right skills and confidence to be included online. The majority of practitioners described those who were more likely to be excluded as 'harder to reach'[86]. The pandemic placed a spotlight on digital inequalities and as a result, engagement practitioners were increasingly concerned about who was (or who could be) harder to reach when using digital and remote approaches. For example, one participant explained that while who were already using technology prior to the pandemic continued to engage, those who had difficulty accessing and/or using online technology became increasingly disengaged. As a result, practitioners were exploring and experimenting with different ways to reach out to stakeholders who were (or could be) excluded. For example, one engager was using a range of synchronous and asynchronous digital tools as well as telephone calls, letters, and house visits, commenting that the main lesson they had learned during the pandemic was to 'play with different ideas and see what happens'.

Practitioners emphasised the importance of experimenting with a variety of different digital tools to explore what works for including specific stakeholders in particular contexts. This is supported by a consensus in the literature that digital tools should be used in conjunction with other methods as part of a wider toolkit that includes in-person and hybrid approaches (Babelon, 2021; Chivers *et al.*, 2021; Kleinhans *et al.*, 2021; Hafferty *et al.*, forthcoming; Thoneick, 2021; Sattler *et al.*, 2022). According to Seltzer and Mahmoudi (2013, p. 13), useful and effective methods of public involvement 'will be the result of a multiplicity of techniques and opportunities […], not a single form or moment in time'. A recent report emphasises the

[86] So-called 'harder to reach' stakeholders can include groups and/or individuals who are more likely to experience barriers than others and may need additional support to engage (e.g., see Hurley *et al.*, 2020).

importance of trialling different techniques to enable people to 'participate in the manner that suits them best' (Saunders, 2021, p. 9).

It is important to recognise that while some groups and individuals became 'harder to reach' due to an increased use of digital and remote approaches, these issues are grounded in systemic socio-economic inequalities (e.g., see Botchwey *et al.*, 2019; Davis and Farmer, 2018; Pradhananga, *et al.*, 2019). Although the practitioners were aware of social and economic disparities and exclusions, many were unsure about the specific impacts of digital engagement on particular demographics, communities, and groups of people. Importantly, practitioners recognised that there was a lack of data regarding the representativeness of engagement processes in general, which links to wider issues around the lack of participant feedback and data to successfully evaluate engagement processes (Glicken, 2000; Karcher *et al.*, 2021; Reed, *et al.*, 2018; Rowe and Frewer, 2000). For example, one practitioner (PR14) reflected that due to project constraints (e.g., timescales) they had not gathered information about their participants and, as a result, there was a lot of 'guesswork' involved in designing and evaluating inclusive engagement processes. Developing and embedding more effective feedback and evaluation strategies was highlighted as a key requirement for the future (see sections 7.2.9 and 7.3.5). Although capturing demographic information from participants was beneficial for evaluating engagement by indicating who was included or excluded and under-represented, conducting participant surveys or requiring them to register and sign-in to engagement sessions could increase fatigue, and could even be perceived as a threat to participants' right to privacy and anonymity (e.g., Asenbaum, 2018; Christensen, 2020).

7.2.5 Power relations

While unequal power dynamics remain a fundamental issue for digital engagement, the research found that power relations can play out differently in online spaces. In contrast to Willis *et al.*, who 'did not find different or more unhealthy power dynamics compared to in-person processes' (2021 p. 14), the research found that digital technology can create a more equal and/or unequal platform to engage, depending on the situation. For example, one practitioner explained how it was easier to create space for less confident people to contribute to discussions using digital tools (e.g., by encouraging people to use the chat box, using the 'hands up' and 'mute' functions, break out rooms, etc.). Another practitioner described digital platforms as an effective 'leveller' of power relations between engagers and participants, and also between different participant groups (PR04). One reason for this was that some digital tools (e.g., videoconferencing) enabled the names and faces of participants on-screen, which could help to foster trust and rapport between engagers and participants by creating a sense of eye contact and increasing the visibility of non-verbal cues (see Licoppe and Morel, 2012).

Both participants and engagers can also feel more comfortable contributing online (e.g., via online chat) compared to in-person, for example, enabling participants to contribute anonymously was highlighted as beneficial for increasing participants' comfort levels and confidence to engage (e.g., see Garcia *et al.*, 2020; Zavattaro and Sementelli, 2014).

Although there can be benefits for flattening power imbalances, any engagement (regardless of the methods used) can still be dominated by poor power dynamics and practitioners emphasised the importance of skilled facilitators for mitigating these risks (also see Willis *et al.*, 2021). Some practitioners felt that engaging quieter and less confident voices was more difficult online as it's harder to 'read the room' (i.e., to see people's body language and facial expressions), which made it more difficult to ensure that everyone had a change to contribute to discussions (also see Hall *et al.*, 2021). Several practitioners reflected on the different roles that facilitators had when engaging online, compared to in-person – for example, PR05 (not-for-profit) commented that digital tools gave facilitators 'more power, yet also more responsibility'. This finding is consistent with much of the literature which explores how digital engagement has reinforced the importance of being reflexive and reconsidering roles, expectations, and relationships in participatory contexts (Börner *et al.*, 2021; Marzi, 2021). This can help to challenge unequal power relations and flatten power hierarchies between those responsible for carrying out engagement and participants (as well as between different public and stakeholder groups).

7.2.6 Social interaction and connection

One of the most significant issues associated with digital engagement is the restrictions that can be placed on the social contextual cues that are available in in-person interaction (Rowe and Gammack, 2004). The practitioners interviewed in this study reflected on the benefits and opportunities for in-person and in-situ engagement that were limited in digital and remote environments (the majority of the issues below were raised when practitioners compared in-person to digital engagement). Building on the existing evidence base, practitioners raised novel concerns including limitations for: (i) in-depth information; (ii) informal and spontaneous conversation; (iii) non-verbal cues; (iv) contextual cues; and (v) collaborative methods. Each of these issues are discussed below.

(i) In-depth information

The majority of practitioners reflected on the value of in-person engagement for capturing in-depth and nuanced information and considered whether (and how) this was lost when engaging online. For example, many engagers described digital engagement as crude, over-simplified, and/or too focused compared to in-person. Some practitioners felt that digital tools were more effective at capturing broad information on a specific topic rather than exploring an issue, area, and/or community in-depth. A related concern was that digital and remote engagement was more effective at capturing quantitative over qualitative information (Archibald *et al.*, 2019; Lobe *et al.*, 2020; Boland *et al.*, 2021) - one practitioner commented that digital tools were 'useful when you've got a specific element of a scheme, […] however, it is more challenging to capture people's in-depth values, opinions, and aspirations about an area (PR22, consultancy). As Tremblay *et al.* (2021) suggest, there are concerns about the methodological rigor of digital technologies, including lack of depth (e.g., due to lack of opportunity for probing and picking up non-verbal cues) and lack of contextual data, which can be due to lack of access to a physical setting (besides what can be viewed on the screen; this is discussed in more detail later in this section). This can impact on the quality and experience of data collection in a variety of settings, which has prompted comparisons of the quality (of the process and/or the output/outcome) between 'traditional' face-to-face and digital remote forms of engagement in both research (e.g., Grönlund *et al.*, 2009; Pina *et al.*, 2017; Salmons, 2011) and practice (e.g., Butler *et al.*, 2020; Hafferty, 2022; Hafferty *et al.,* forthcoming).

(ii) Informal and spontaneous conversation

Another issue was that digital engagement was perceived to be lacking in opportunities for informal and spontaneous conversations, which are valuable for producing in-depth and unexpected insights. The majority of participants described selecting online and in-person methods as a trade-off between 'efficiency' and 'high quality social interaction'. For example, one participant (PR04) described how it was more difficult to have informal conversations with participants before and after the 'formal' planned interaction during online engagement processes, limiting the discussion of topics which were 'off the agenda' and restricting activities that build rapport. This is consistent with other research into digital engagement, for example Hutcheson and Longhurst (2017) suggested that virtual meetings restrict informal and communal activities like sharing food, ordering a coffee, or talking about physical surroundings, concluding that many people are less comfortable with how to 'perform' in online as opposed to in-person spaces (also see Miller and Sinanan, 2014). While in-person encounters can also be structured, awkward, or too formal, there can be fewer opportunities to facilitate informal conversations during digital and remote processes. However, the findings indicated that these challenges can also be mitigated through skilled facilitation and premeditated efforts to encourage informal interactions, build intimacy and rapport, increase opportunity for sharing personal experiences, and even introduce playfulness to online engagement (Jenner and Myers, 2019; Willis *et al.,* 2021). For example, practitioners described how they had encouraged informal discussion during the breaks of online meetings, invited participants to introduce themselves at the start and/or stay and chat after the meeting ended, and introduced creative, visual, and/or gamified methods to promote fun and enjoyment. The majority of practitioners felt that using multimodal and multimedia approaches were beneficial for promoting more informal and interactive environments. It was also important to ensure smaller group sizes and encourage people to turn their cameras on. One participant emphasised the importance of efforts to replicate natural 'human' elements of engaging online, promoting 'active listening' (see Staddon *et al.*, 2021, for a definition), empathy and open dialogue through using smaller groups, facilitating questions, and using storytelling to share experiences.

(iii) Non-verbal cues

Digital and remote engagement was also considered to limit opportunities to pick up on non-verbal cues such as body language, gestures, eye contact, tone and volume of voice, touch, and other interpersonal social signals (also see Falter *et al.*, 2022; Mualam, *et al.,* 2022; Rowe and Gammack, 2004). Non-verbal cues are an essential part of human communication which can indicate aspects such as strength of feeling and shared understandings (Rowe and Gammack, 2004), and have been described as 'honest signals' about people's underlying states which are subconsciously shared (Byun *et al.*, 2011). For example, interviewees highlighted difficulties 'reading the room' online, as well as issues with catching people's attention, gauging participants' emotional states, being able to tell whether participants were present and attentive, building relationships and a sense of camaraderie between participants, among other issues. Several participants described the importance of encouraging engagement participants to turn their cameras on during digital engagement interactions for capturing non-verbal cues (however, webcams can increase the risk of digital fatigue, see Shockley *et al.*, 2021). The findings built upon the literature - when social interaction and communication takes place in a digital and remote setting, these social cues can be missed in a way that is detrimental to building trust and rapport (Mualam *et al.*, 2022), the quality of discussion and data produced , and there are increased possibilities for misunderstanding and miscommunication (Rowe and Gammack, 2004). The literature also suggests that when comparing digital and remote to in-person approaches, the lack of non-verbal communication can be attributed to the prioritisation of communication via text over verbal and/or physical person-to-person interaction (Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009; Mualam *et al.*, 2022; Phillips *et al.* 2018; Willson, 2000).

(iv) Contextual data

The use of only digital and remote methods for engagement can restrict the capture and interpretation of contextual data, particularly as access to physical environments are limited to what can be viewed through a screen (Tremblay *et al.*, 2021). Practitioners emphasised the importance of in-person and in-situ[87] methods for incorporating local knowledge in decision-making processes to better comprehend complex issues (also see Evans and Jones, 2011; Holton, 2019; Martini, 2020; Stals *et al.*, 2014). Many practitioners were using in-person and in-situ methods before the pandemic, both without technology and through digitally-mediated[88] approaches (e.g., using mobile apps with Global Positioning Systems and Geographic Information Systems technologies), which included walking methods and site visits. They reflected that it was difficult (and/or impossible) to achieve many of the benefits of being in-person and in-situ through entirely remote and digital engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted how, and even if, in-situ methods can be conducted (Coverdale *et al.*, 2021; Howlett, 2022; Yavo-Ayalon *et al.*, 2022). For example, one participant (PR28, non-departmental public body) commented that there will always be a need to engage in-person and in-situ in the future because it has 'great benefit for getting people together and talking, naturally, in the field […] Which you can't necessarily achieve through digital engagement' and they also emphasised the need to 'be outside and get in the environment and see things for real. Hands-on type stuff'. Practitioners also reflected on the free-flowing nature of in-person and in-situ conversations - 'Outside, people don't feel constrained […] I think it helps people to talk better, they're more engaged' (PR08). Others highlighted the importance of these methods for building trust with participants, promoting knowledge sharing, and for breaking down power inequalities (also see Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017; Chiswell and Wheeler, 2016; Thomas *et al.* 2019). These issues relate to methodological and epistemological questions

[87] In-situ methodologies can include 'walking and talking', ' place-based', and 'go-along' methods when researchers walk with participants (Carpiano, 2009; Holton and Riley, 2014), which broadly describe multi-sensory qualitative (and usually in-person) approaches that are immersed in place and time (Sharek *et al.*, 2020) and can be employed as part of an engagement process, are valued as they can elicit in-depth data prompted by meanings and connections to the surrunding environment (Anderson, 2004; Evans and Jones, 2011). Digital tools can be combined with in-situ approaches through digitally-mediated approaches, for example, a natural capital mapping app was used alongside farm surveys and community walks to enable coordinated action for climate change during an Environmental Land Management (ELM) Test and Trial (Phelps and Geerah, 2020).

[88] It is important to note that digitally-mediated, in-person and in-situ (place-based) methods are not guaranteed to achieve beneficial outcomes in all situations. For example, Brockett (2016) found that the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) maps while 'talking and walking' with participants made participants less likely to contribute as they felt over-awed by the images and as a consequence felt they had little to contribute to the conversation (also see Brockett *et al.*, 2019).

around how the ‘field’ is conceptualised more broadly in an increasingly digitalised world, both in research and practice (Howlett, 2022).

Practitioners outlined some creative and novel approaches that they had used to remotely collect in-situ information in collaboration with participants (e.g., during the pandemic). They described how tools like online survey questionnaires, digital participatory mapping, and 3D visualisation had been used to capture, analyse, and represent complex relationships to place both before and during the pandemic. For example, one participant discussed the benefits of 3D visualisation software to create virtual tours, fly-throughs, and exhibitions to engage local communities, compared to more traditional in-person exhibition-style sessions (e.g., Smith *et al.*, 2019). A variety of novel approaches to conducting in-situ approaches were also developed during the pandemic; for example, Yavo-Ayalon *et al.* (2022) created the ‘Walkie-Talkie Map’ to remotely collect and present interviews with visitors of New York City to capture place-based experiences during COVID-19, and Watson and Lupton (2022) used a video ‘home tour’ and elicitation techniques to elicit sensory, affective, and relational elements of people’s experiences working from home. Ultimately, however, practitioners emphasised the value of hybrid approaches, expressing that there were benefits of in-person and in-situ methods which could not be replicated virtually (also see Chivers *et al.*, 2021; Dawkins and Young, 2020; Kindred *et al.,* 2021; Hafferty *et al.,* forthcoming).

(v) Collaborative methods

Despite the various ways that social interaction can be promoted in vitual spaces, it is not possible to meaningfully replicate human-to-human interaction in all situations. The majority of practitioners reflected that some fundamental aspects of being human were missing when engaging online, emphasising a desire for maintaining meaningful human contact and being together in the same physical space. Reflecting on the various challenges, practitioners felt that online and remote engagement limited the extent to which collaborative, co-produced, and/or co-designed approaches could be conducted effectively. For example, one participant explained that it was difficult to conduct meaningful collaborative design work via digital methods (e.g., Sattler *et al.*, 2022), reflecting that face-to-face approaches were essential for collaborative techniques due to the ability to pick up non-verbal cues and engage in more informal dialogue. Several participants felt that virtual approaches to engagement were more effective for top-down rather than bottom-up engagement (in contrast, however, Mwambari *et al.*, 2021, found that distanced online research helped to build more equitable collaborations). There are a number of examples in the literature where collaborative and co-produced engagement has been successfully carried out online (e.g., Hall *et al.*, 2021; Marzi, 2021).

7.2.7 Trust and transparency

Trust and transparency are foundational principles for engagement: if engagement is perceived as transparent, open, and fair (e.g., making a balanced decision considering diverse perspectives) then this can help to increase public and stakeholder perceptions of trust and credibility in decisions and decision-making organisations (Fiorino, 1990; Reed, 2008; Renn *et al*, 1995; Richards, *et al.*, 2004; Stirling, 2008). The research findings contribute to a growing body of literature that argues that trust and transparency take on new dimensions within the context of remote engagement, digital innovation, and social distancing (e.g., Chivers *et al.*, 2021; Hall *et al.*, 2021; Hafferty *et al.,* forthcoming; Ingram *et al.*, 2022; Kindred *et al.*, 2021; Mualam *et al.*, 2022; Panchyshyn and Corbett, 2022; Schwartz-Ziv, 2020; Tong and Chan, 2022). For example, practitioners described situations where it can be more difficult for engagers (and engaging organisations) to develop and maintain trusting relationships engagement participants, with many practitioners emphasising the importance of having formed pre-existing relationships with stakeholders in-person. This is supported by the literature, for example, Sattler *et al.* (2022, p. 68) commented that 'In this online setting, it is difficult to build trust with stake-holders who are meeting for the first time, and the interaction among them is limited'. A recent study found that practitioners viewed in-person engagement as more personal compared to online allowing for more meaningful human connections and building trust (Butler *et al.*, 2020). Several practitioners identified the need to build trust and rapport in-person with participants, for example, PR12 (software company) explained that it was important that engagers aren't perceived as 'hiding behind a digital tool', and others commented that the best way to establish relationships with was to meet people in-person and 'have a conversation with them and see what they look like' (PR24, university). Building trusting relationships in-person may need to happen before engaging using digital and remote methods - aligning with the findings of this research, several studies noted how trust and rapport was already present before using online methods (Marzi, 2021; Sattler *et al.*, 2022). However, this does not mean that it is impossible to build trust and rapport with participants remotely and online (e.g., Willis *et al.*, 2021).

The extent to which stakeholders trust advice and/or guidance that is conveyed using digital tools is also important (e.g., Kindred *et al.*, 2021; Ingram *et al.*, 2022). This PhD research suggested that practitioners were concerned about maintaining the credibility of information shared during decision-making processes which involved digital tools (this is also a fundamental issue that could be true for any digital and/or non-digital approach where information is shared between people). Perceived risks of using digital and remote methods (compared to in-person) included miscommunication, misinterpretation, and bias, which could cause confusion or even conflict among stakeholders. This finding is supported by Butler *et al.* (2020) who found that practitioners perceived in-person engagement as critical for explaining complex information to stakeholders in a clear and credible manner. Chivers *et al*., (2021) suggest that involving stakeholders in the production of information provided via digital tools can help to increase the perceived trust, credibility, and relevance of the material (also see Marzi, 2021). There is consensus in the literature that the integration of digital and in-person methods of communication is likely to be the most effective way to build trust in organisation-stakeholder relationships in the digital era, (Chivers *et al.,* 2021; Panchyshyn and Corbett, 2022; Sattler *et al.*, 2022; Tong and Chan, 2022). Future research should further unpack concepts of trust in digital engagement and its relations to legitimacy, credibility, and accountability, while expanding investigations into the challenges and opportunities of technology and the value of hybrid approaches.

7.2.8 Privacy, security, and well-being

Although these issues are inherent to any engagement process, the research indicated that privacy and security issues can take on new dimensions within digital and remote engagement contexts (compared to in-person). Practitioners provided rich insight into a range of concerns including those relating to confidentiality and anonymity, bias and misrepresentation, data ownership, safe storage, and more systemic issues related to structural privacy. However, several practitioners also explained that privacy and security risks were likely to be no different to in-person engagement, partly because data was being handled in the same way in accordance with GDPR regulations and organisational guidelines.

For some engagers, the privacy and security of digital technology became a more prominent concern during the pandemic (see also Boland *et al.*, 2021; Engward *et al.*, 2022; Hall *et al.* , 2021). One particular concern identified in this research was the formal identification of participants during digital engagement processes (relating to broader privacy issues related to participant anonymity, see Asenbaum, 2018; Christensen, 2020; Nissenbaum, 1999). On one hand, practitioners believed that it was important to respect and maintain participants' right to anonymity, for example, not requiring them to identify themselves through by registering, showing their names, and/or turning cameras on. Requiring participants to identify themselves can decrease engagement because some groups and individuals can become less eager to contribute (see also Rhee and Kim, 2009). On the other hand, as suggested by Christensen (2020) anonymity can create a more hostile environment for deliberative discussion. Linking with other sections in this chapter, this research revealed other related risks including the increased formality of meetings, reduced opportunities for building trust, enhanced risk of misinterpretation, digital fatigue and drop-outs, and the decreased quality and spontaneity of conversation. Collecting participant information was also cited as important for evaluating engagement processes (see sections 7.2.4 and 7.2.9).

Digital and remote engagement can risk the health and wellbeing of both participants and engagers. Risks to physical and psychological health included digital fatigue, social isolation, and mental health (also see Le Blanc, 2020; Shockley *et al.*, 2021; Rahman *et al.*, 2021). Several practitioners emphasised the importance of in-person social interaction for improving mental health (linking with section 7.2.6) – for example, PR05 (charity/not-for-profit) commented that 'face to face interaction is vital for social cohesion, and for individuals' mental health. And I surely miss it {when engaging/working remotely}.'. The mental health and wellbeing impacts of digital engagement warrant further investigation, particularly within planning and environmental contexts. For example, Newson *et al.* (2021) found that person-to-person contact was positively associated with well-being, and computer-mediated communication had a negative association, and Juchnowicz and Kinowska (2021) found that working exclusively remotely was shown to negatively impact well-being in terms of workplace relationships and work-life balance. Future research must consider these impacts for the well-being of both participants and engagers.

7.2.9 Feedback and evaluation

Issues related to the quality (or lack of) strategies for collecting participant feedback and the evaluation of engagement processes have been discussed throughout this chapter (e.g., section 7.2.4). Here, 'feedback' is used here to refer to participants' views and experiences of the engagement processes and outcomes (e.g., public and stakeholder views of the effectiveness of digital methods)[89]. The literature suggests that there are numerous challenges to evaluating engagement and the findings of evaluation processes are rarely shared and/or lead to demonstrable improvements in engagement practice (Dyer *et al.*, 2014; Falanga and Ferrão, 2021; Glicken, 2000; Karcher *et al.*, 2021; Luyet *et al.*, 2012; Ran, 2012; Reed *et al.*, 2018c; Rowe and Frewer, 2000, 2004; Sterling *et al.*, 2019). These challenges are not specific to digital engagement and are relevant for any participatory process.

Overall, the findings indicated that feedback and/or evaluation of engagement processes and outcomes could be ad-hoc, informal, and anecdotal. Several practitioners were unsure

[89] Although the differences between feedback and evaluation were not explored in depth by the interviewees, it is also important to acknowledge that there are differences between these two terms: feedback tends to refer to information about reactions to an engagement process and/or outcome, whereas evaluation describes a long-term assessment of the value of the engagement process and its success at achieving intended outcomes for different actors (e.g., for stakeholder participants, for policymakers, for organisations, etc.).

whether feedback on engagement participants' views and experiences of the engagement process had been formally collected. For example, both PR05 (charity/not-for-profit) and PR14 (museum) described that their perceptions of participant feedback were based on anecdotal evidence. Reflecting this, Burchell (2015) suggested that the evaluation of engagement processes remains a 'minority pursuit' that often relies on 'very informal and anecdotal evidence' (2015 p., 44; also see Coleman and Firmstone, 2014; Rouncefield-Swales *et al.*, 2021). This is not to say that anecdotal evidence is not valuable for evaluating engagement processes, but to highlight more fundamental issues relating to engagers' capacity and capability to conduct robust, systematic, and institutionally embedded evaluation processes (see section 7.3). Some practitioners reflected that their organisations had recently been undergoing a 'big push' to enhance evaluation strategies (e.g., PR21, Government department). Others explained that while they had identified a need for improving feedback and evaluation (e.g., in their team and/or organsisation), they had not yet managed to start this process. The literature indicates several possible reasons for this: as many engagement activities are unplanned and/or not adequately planned, there are often limited budget, staffing, and/or evaluation expertise available (e.g., Reed *et al.,* 2018c) as well as a lack of clear motivation and/or structured techniques for identifying participants and evaluating engagement practices (Emery *et al.,* 2015; Rowe and Frewer, 2005). Many of these issues – including resource constrains and capacity/capability - are discussed within an organisational context in section 7.3 (particularly 7.3.5).

7.2.10 Hybrid futures

The value of blending digital (remote) and in-person engagement through hybrid engagement approaches has been discussed throughout this chapter. The majority of practitioners called for more flexible, adaptable, and hybrid approaches to engagement, which is supported by an extensive and expanding body of literature (see Babelon, 2021; Babelon *et al.*, 2017; Chivers *et al.*, 2021; Commonplace, 2021; Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Galeote *et al.*, 2021; Ingram *et al.*, 2021; Kindred *et al.*, 2021; Sattler *et al.*, 2022; Thoneick, 2021). In particular, practitioners highlighted a need for learning about what worked (and what did not work) with regards to digital engagement during the pandemic and using these understandings to inform more effective strategies in the future. The findings also added some specific insights regarding the temporal aspects of hybrid engagement. In some cases, practitioners felt that the use of online tools were more appropriate at the start of engagement processes to scope out big ideas, before following up with in-person methods to collect more in-depth information. The literature indicates that using online surveys and/or digital participatory mapping platforms can be effective for gaining both broad and local insights, and can be followed up with in-person methods when necessary (e.g., see Commonplace, 2021; Falco and Kleinhans, 2018a). In other situations, interviewees felt that it was essential to have in-person methods at the start of engagement processes before any digital/remote tools were used (e.g., to build relationships and/or facilitate more informal conversations; see section 7.2.6 and also Butler *et al.,* 2020). The findings emphasised the fundamental importance and desire for human-to-human contact and emotional connection, which many engagers felt could only be successfully and meaningfully formed during in-person interactions. Ultimately, the findings highlighted that there is no one-size-fits all in-person, digital (remote), and/or hybrid (digital and in-person) approach for effective engagement. Importantly, although hybrid approaches are frequently advocated as more inclusive and effective than using in-person and digital (remote) methods in isolation (e.g., Sattler *et al.,* 2022), this research has shown that they may not even be the best approach in all situations: it completely depends on the context within which these approaches are deployed. The contextual factors that shape engagement are explored in more depth in section 7.3 in relation to organisational barriers for engagement.

7.2.11 Summary

This section has discussed a range of challenges and opportunities for digital and remote engagement, focusing on the factors which can influence the effectiveness of engagement for meeting its goals and benefits. The findings revealed that these factors are highly complex, interlinked, and context-dependent; in almost every situation where a digital tool was used for more effective engagement (e.g., more inclusive, interactive, or more transparent processes), there was another situation where digital approaches introduced new risks and caused unintended negative consequences. In contrast to 'digital first' and 'digital by default' narratives in policy and practice, this thesis emphasises that there is no one-size-fits all digital (remote), in-person, or hybrid approach to engagement. The effectiveness of digital engagement

7.3 Challenges and opportunities for institutionalising engagement

The literature identified that to be successful in the long term, any stakeholder engagement processes (regardless of the tools and methods used) must be institutionalised (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2016; Baker and Chapin, 2018; Bussu *et al.*, 2022; Elstub and Escobar, 2019; Escobar, 2021; Hoppe, 2009, 2011; Klerkx *et al.*, 2017; Mackenzie and Larson, 2010; Reed, 2008; Scottish Government, 2022; Sørensen and Torfing, 2017; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998; Wesselink *et al.*, 2011). Building on the previous sections (7.2), the use of digital tools (and strategies to mitigate risks) must be part of an organisational strategy for undertaking effective engagement, if these processes are going to be successful in the long term. As the discussion in the previous sections (7.2) has demonstrated, digital tools for engagemet are complex and have multiple, interrelated, and context-dependent challenges and opportunities. For example, organisations may lack the capacity and capability to address and manage inherent risks, fulfil requirements, and navigate other socio-technical challenges that underpin the use of digital tools (Afzalan and Muller, 2018). This part of the chapter aimed to explore research question two (RQ2): *'What are the challenges for institutionalising engagement and how can they be overcome?'*.

Interviews with practitioners and practice-enablers revealved five organisational (inclusive of institutional) considerations which can constrain or enable engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes. As Lachapelle *et al.* (2003) suggested, many of the issues related to effective engagement (e.g., resource constraints, lack of skills, etc.) are ultimately organisations in nature. This was reflected in this study as themes related to institutionalising engagement emerged from the empirical data and engagement with non-academic stakeholders (see Chapter 3). The research found that organisational barriers are complex, rooted in wider political and socio-economic inequalities, and are unlikely to occur indepently from one another. The following interlinked issues are considered:

1. Roles and resources
2. Skills and confidence
3. Managing expectations
4. Agency
5. Embedding engagement as a long-term process

While the presence and interaction of some challenges can be considered to be the immediate cause of unsuccessful engagement (e.g., resource constraints and/or lack of relevant skills), as Lachapelle *et al*. (2003) and Wesselink *et al.* (2018) comment, ultimately the basis for all of these barriers are organisations in nature – that is, rooted in organisations cultures and thus may require a culture change to mitigate risks in the long term (e.g., Escobar, 2021; Hafferty, 2022). In addition, while trust and rapport is discussed as a separate theme in other research (e.g., Lachapelle *et al*., 2003), this research includes trust as embedded throughout each of the five factors. Upon reflection of the literature, one key finding is that many of these issues can be experienced across different types of organisations and different engagement settings.

7.3.1 Roles and resources

One key challenge identified by practitioners was the availability of resources (e.g., time, funding, skills, and human resources), the clarity of roles and responsibilities (e.g., what engagement requires and who is responsible), and the impact of this on the engagement process. From the practitioners' perspectives, the availability of adequate resources could restrict their capacity and capability to engage. This reflects issues highlighted in the literature, for example, Escobar (2021) found that engagers 'doubted the feasibility of involving communities due to a lack of resources and capacity within institutions' (p. 156; also see Baker and Chapin, 2018). In their study of planners' perspectives of engagement, Lachapelle *et al.* (2003) identified numerous barriers regarding the flexibility of decision-making processes including time, funding, a lack of human resources, and instances where staff reported that they were not clear about what was expected of them when conducting engagement (e.g., due to lack of clear guidance). This is reflected in the findings which included practitioners' concerns regarding the availability of skills and expertise within organisations, and more specifically, the extent to which existing skills and expertise were signposted in their organisation. Practitioners also emphasised the importance of knowing explicitly what was required of them and what this involved. In their report on institutionalising participatory and deliberative democracy, the Scottish Government (2022) identified a lack of specific participation skills within the Government which included support, expertise, and guidance to public sector staff. They reflected that – at present – there was no infrastructure which could provide sustainable support for participation work, with current support offered 'ad-hoc, inconsistent, and in addition to existing job roles' which was deemed 'inefficient and far from cost effective' (Scottish Government, 2022, p. 15). Practitioners in this research felt that it was crucial to scope resource availability in each situation where engagement is conducted, including, for example, the resources that currenty exist (e.g., within a project team or organisation), identifying any gaps, and highlighting what resources can be provided within and/or external to the organisation.

7.3.2 Skills and confidence

Another challenge identified by this research was the availability of skills required to effectively engage. Key to this was practitioners' confidence in their skillset for carrying out engagement. Although a large body of literature focuses on engagement participants' capacity and capability to engage (e.g., Ambrose *et al.,* 2022; Le Blanc, 2020; McKinley *et al.*, 2021), less is known about practitioners' confidence in their skillset to carry out engagement effectively and the extent to which they feel adequately supported by the organisations that they work in (Lachapelle *et al.*, 2003; Escobar, 2021; Scottish Government, 2022).

This research highlighted the key role that organisations played in undermining and/or developing their staff's skills and confidence in engaging. Many engagers described feeling nervous (or even fearful) of engaging due to a range of reasons which link to the other themes in this section (7.3.1-5) including perceived risk of conflict with stakeholders, legal and/or

GDPR issues, negative repurcussions from not being 'on message', and a lack of agency. For example, one engager commented that they were nervous about the risk of conflict with participants, explaining that they were 'just doing their job' and 'didn't sign up to get abused' (PR13, local authority). Another engager described engagement as a 'target rich area for litigation; one screw up in that procedure, and there is your challenge' (PR36, non-departmental public body). The findings were similar to Lachapelle *et al.* (2003) who found that practitioners viewed procedural obligations as constraining good practice, particularly with regards to overwhelming responsibilities and the nervousness of legal consequences if something goes wrong. Practitioners can view some engagement processes as inevitably involving conflict, with some even fearing that meetings will turn aggressive (Lachapelle *et al.*, 2003; Bickerstaff and Walker, 2005; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). There is a need for any participatory process to recognise that 'decision-making involves conflict and partiality, […] power relations and […] unresolvable disagreements' (Bickerstaff and Walker, 2005 p. 2139). Organisations play a key role in decreasing barriers and addressing staff's fear of negative reactions from external stakeholders when engaging (Bandelli and Konijn, 2013).

It was crucial that practitioners felt supported by their organisations to develop the skills required to engage, which can in turn increase their confidence and reduce nervousness/fear (also see Bussu *et al.,* 2022; Escobar, 2021; Klerkx *et al.*, 2017; Scottish Government, 2022). The research identified the need to invest in people skills which could include communication, facilitation, leadership, active listening, empathy, conflict resolution, and negotiation (see also Anson, Bostrom and Wynne, 1995; Ibisch *et al.*, 2016; Luyet *et al.*, 2012; Krpálek *et al.*, 2021; Mease *et al.*, 2018; Staddon *et al.*, 2021; Thaler and Levin-Keitel, 2016). For example, engagers described people skills as 'fundamental to what we do' (PR38, non-departmental public body) and highlighted the importance of engagers being able to 'talk to people, to be able to emphasise' and to 'build rapport' with stakeholders (PR37, non-departmental public body). Practitioners discussed the importance of giving equal weight to people skills and so-called 'technical skills' (e.g., knowledge and skills that are needed to design engagement prodcesses to meet specific goals and conditions; see Ibisch *et al.,* 2016). Social science skills and methods (e.g., interviewing) were identified as particularly important for engagement, which is also highlighted by Canfield *et al.* (2022) who highlighted that organisations need to hire staff that are 'trained in translational science that know how to effectively apply social science methods to engage with stakeholders' (Canfield *et al.,* 2022, p. 199).

Finally, the research highlighted the significance of organisations providing training to develop their staff's skillset and confidence for engaging. This should involve scoping existing skills and expertise across the organisation (and outside of the organisation), highlighting gaps and upskilling where necessary. For example, the Scottish Government (2022) emphasised the need for an established unit which should have the capacity, skills, and expertise to disseminate and embed the development of participatory approaches, drive standards, and offer coaching and support across teams. The findings of this thesis also suggested that training should be supported by a dedicated member of staff (or team) who specialises in engagement. Leadership, coaching, and/or mentorship schemes have been shown to be important for embedding an engagement culture in organisations (e.g., Bussu *et al.*, 2022; Reed, 2022a). These approaches should focus on collective approaches involving several people with different roles at different times (Bryson, 2018), rather than it be the responsibility of one or two individuals to govern the process and catalyse change (Bussu and Galanti, 2018). Practitioners highlighted the need for staff in dedicated roles to support engagement, provide skills and expertise, which aligns with research on advanced training pathways where senior colleagues can design training packages to suit needs and promote relevant specialist skills (e.g., Reed, 2022a; Scottish Government, 2022). External training and expertise can add value to more advanced, specialist elements of the training required for engagement. As Razzaque (2006) suggests, no single organisation can be expected to hold all of the expertise and knowledge for good decision-making, and it is important to draw resources and learn from the experiences of others – organisations do not evolve in isolation and are instead co-produced, networked, and constantly in the making (Pallett and Chilvers, 2015; Pallett, 2018).

7.3.3 Managing expectations

It is important that stakeholder expectations of are carefully managed throughout the engagement process (e.g., see Allen *et al.*, 2013; Parker and Murray, 2012). As Conallin *et al.* (2017 p. 131) suggest, stakeholders' expectations are dynamic and engagement processes need to both understand and manage these expectations. Engagers need to either deliver on stakeholder expectations, clearly communicate why they cannot be met, or provide alternatives (Conallin *et al.,* 2017 p. 131; Lacroix *et al.*, 2016). Organisational structures can work to enable and constrain engagers' ability to effectively manage stakeholder expectations, for example, due to available resources, shifting organisational priorities, and/or past relationships with stakeholders.

This research revealed in-depth insights into practitioners' perspectives of managing stakeholder expectations during the engagement process. Practitioners emphasised that they were rarely starting from a blank slate in terms of their relationship with stakeholders, meaning that members of the public and other stakeholders often had pre-conceived views of the organisation and/or staff members carrying out engagement. Negative expectations of the engagement process were particularly difficult to manage, which could be due to the nature of the relationship between participants and the organisation and/or previous encounters with staff (also see Bickerstaff and Walker, 2005; De Santo, 2016), as well as more general expectations in society regarding mitigating social and environmental risks (Benn *et al.*, 2009). Some engagers felt that stakeholder conflict was inevitable and that some decision-making processes were designed to attract opposition (e.g., Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998; Wesselink *et al.,* 2011). Stakeholders can also have too high expectations compared to what is realistically achievable in the engagement process (e.g., due to lack of organisational capacity and/or capability to engage).

Practitioners highlighted that although it was important to identify and meet stakeholder needs as much as possible, it was also important to be realistic about constraints and that ultimately, the outcome may not satisfy everyone involved. It was important to be clear about what is on/off the table in terms of discussion, who can be involved, and the extent to which stakeholders can influence the decision-making process, among other considerations. This aligns with the literature which evidences the fundamental constraints with planning and environmental decision-making processes, in that the final plans and decisions often need to conform to government guidance (see Petts, 2001, 2015; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998; Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas, 1998). As Bickerstaff and Walker comment, formal systems control access to the decision-making process and hence, rather than providing the opportunity to radically challenge existing power structures and knowledge systems, engagement can be more suited to top-down decision-making approaches (2005 p. 2139-40; also see Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Stirling, 2008). This research demonstrated that a variety of factors can constrain what is possible during decision-making processes including organisational capacity and capability to engage (e.g., resource constraints including time and funding), organisational priorities, and so forth (see Allen *et al.*, 2013; De Santo, 2016; Parker and Murray, 2012). It is important that engaging organisations and staff are up-front with stakeholders about what can be realistically achieved during the engagement process, which should include explaining how the process works, any potential limitations, clarifying roles/responsibilities, and so forth. Practitioners emphasised the importance of transparency (also see Mussehl *et al.*, 2022), explaining that if stakeholder expectations are not managed and supported effectively than this can erode trust and have a long-term negative impact on organisational and/or staff relationships with stakeholders. These issues were also highlighted by de Santo (2016, p. 97), who reported that a ‘lack of transparency’ impacted public and stakeholder trust and confidence in environmental decision-making carried out by the UK government, which can due to the poor management of expectations, amongst other factors (also see Scottish Government, 2022).

7.3.4 Agency

Issues related to engagers' agency to effectively carry out engagement were a key consideration and practitioners described various factors that could constrain their ability to carry out engagement and/or choose how it is conducted. These issues are often rooted in the way that the established organisational culture operates, as well as individual and societal values held by actors in the engagement process (Bussu *et al.*, 2022; Lachapelle and McCool, 2005; Scottish Government, 2022). The literature related to the challenges and opportunities for stakeholder engagement does not often explicitly consider the dynamic and interrelated issues related to staff and/or organisational agency (e.g., Escobar, 2021; Lachapelle *et al.*, 2003; Wesselink *et al.*, 2011).

Building on the previous section (7.3.3), the practitioners reported that a lack of individual agency could make it difficult to manage expectations with stakeholders during the engagement process. Engagers identified various constraining factors including actors who have the power to disrupt and/or terminate engagement, as well as dynamic and unpredictable organisational and/or decision-making environments that are rooted in wider political systems. For example, one participant described how engagement was at risk of being 'derailed' by actors with more power in policy and government spheres (PR16), and another participant (PR13) who outlined how their plans to engage were changed, and then later cancelled, due to decisions coming from more senior members of staff in their organisation. This aligns with Lachapelle *et al.* (2003) who found that engagers described barriers that involved the values, goals, and assumptions held within organisatioal frameworks and more broadly within society. Specifically, they reported that some engagers felt that they were being controlled during the engagement process by a 'top-down decision-making structure based on hierarchical authorisation of objectives and designs at various government levels', which was rooted in the culture of organisations and how they operate (Lachapelle *et al.*, 2003 p. 484). If engagers are to be considered 'not just as facilitators but also as culture change workers' (Escobar, 2021 p. 8), then difficulties regarding control and agency over the engagement process can restrict their potential to achieve this change. In addition, one organisation can also be controlled by another. For example, organisations and institutions sometimes need to adhere to protocols set by an external body which can impact engagement and how/when it happens, including the type of information that can be communicated to wider public and stakeholder audiences (some of these issues are also considered in Escobar, 2021; De Santo, 2016).

The findings aligned with research that explores how organisational barriers are unlikely to operate in isolation from one another (e.g., Lachapelle *et al.,* 2003). For example, issues relating to lack of agency could be influenced by trust dynamics between actors involved in the engagement process. External control over the engagement process was frustrating for practitioners (particularly if they had high and/or positive aspirations for engagement), which risked causing disillusionment among engaging practitioners as well as eroding trust with stakeholders (e.g., linking with section 7.3.3). In addition, several engagers felt that their organisation did not trust them enough to engage (e.g., if they were perceived to not have the relevant expertise and/or seniority), which can undermine their confidence in engaging (e.g., linking with section 7.3.2). While the majority of the literature on engagement focuses on empowering public and stakeholder groups in the decision-making process (which remains an inherent rationale for all engagement processes), this research has demonstrated that it is also important for engagers to feel empowered and supported by their organisations carry out engagement (also see Escobar, 2021; Scottish Government, 2022). If practitioners responsible for engagement are not adequately supported and empowered to conduct engagement, then this will likely undermine the effectiveness of engagement processes and hinder their positive impact for everyone involved.

7.3.5 Embedding engagement as a long-term process

As Escobar *et al.* suggest, participatory processes in general 'need to be undertaken as more than an "add on" to existing democratic practices, and instead institutionalised as part of the democratic process' (2017 p. 18). The same can be said for the challenges discussed within the context of this study: engagement must be considered as a continuous, dynamic, and long-term process as opposed to an add-on or one-off activity. The research findings emphasised the importance of having a clear, consistent, and adaptable organisation-wide strategy for engagement. From the perspective of the practitioners interviewed as part of this research, this should include: (i) guidance with clear steps/stages to help navigate engagers throughout the engagement process and beyond (also see Baker and Chapin, 2018; Reed *et al.,* 2018a; Scottish Government, 2022); (ii) guidance and support which can be adapted to the needs of staff across different parts of the organisation, which should start with a clear understanding of existing approaches for engagement while highlighting any gaps, training needs, and other requirements (e.g., Hafferty, 2022; Scottish Government, 2022); and (iii) organisational (or sector-wide) minimal requirements for engagement and a system for monitoring compliance - for example, Parker and Murray (2018) imply that radical change is unlikely to happen without a good track record of monitoring (and evaluating) success and/or using sanctions to enforce an engagement culture in organisations. In addition, engagement needs to be institutionally embedded as part of an organisation's vision, mission, and strategy which requires consistency and clear goals/objectives – engagers emphasised how a culture change needs to be embedded over time (also see (Bussu *et al.*, 2022), the importance of empowering staff to engage as a fundamental part of the work that they do (Escobar, 2021; Hafferty, 2022), and the requirement of joined-up thinking and consistency across the organisation (e.g., consistent understandings of what engagement is and how it is achieved; also see Hafferty, 2022). The Scottish Government's strategy for institutionalising participatory and deliberative democracy provides some useful points to consider for any organisation aiming to embed engagement. This includes the introduction of a Participation Framework to provide guidance to strengthen and institutionalise key elements of participatory processes (Scottish Government, 2022b). In addition, they emphasise the importance of centralised approaches to developing a knowledge base, providing expertise, developing guidance, and maintaining standards in order to institutionalise participatory approaches across the nation (also see Defra, 2022; Hafferty, 2022).

Finally, practitioners explained that embedding engagement requires action from leadership/management as well as from members of staff across the organisation (i.e., culture change should not be solely led by top-down initiatives but should involve staff in the setting of agendas, goals, ambitions, strategy, and so forth). Where possible, members of the public and stakeholder groups should also be involved in setting organisations' strategic priorities for engagement. However, strategies also need to be realistic, transparent, and critical about situations where strategies are being developed within an institutional, political, and legal frameworks that remain 'top-down' (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998; Wesselink *et al.*, 2011). As such, while there may be a degree of flexibility for more co-produced, co-designed, and collaborative approaches, it is important to consider (and mitigate as much as possible) the various regulatory and institutionalised challenges explored in this thesis and beyond. As Wesselink *et al*. (2011) conclude, there is a need for more reflexive awareness of the different ways in which participation is defined and practiced in contemporary environmental decision-making (including the organisational challenges and opportunities), which must include a more realistic assessment of what is possible for changes towards more participatory and deliberative decision-making (also see Lachapelle and McCool, 2005; Escobar, 2021).

7.3.6 Summary

The discussion in this section has provided rich insights into a range of organisational factors than can constrain or enable the effectiveness of engagement. The findings build on the previous discussion (in section 7.2) by understanding the more fundamental reasons why many of these challenges are experienced at an organisational and/or institutional level. Ultimately, the research demonstrated that many of these challenges are rooted in organisational cultures and may require a culture shift to mitigate risks in the long term.

7.4 Enhancing current understandings of what works for stakeholder engagement

This chapter has discussed the findings of the research in relation to the effectiveness of digital tools for conducting meaningful engagement (research question one) and the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising engagement as part of an organisational culture (research question two). Building on the previous two research questions, this section addresses the third and final research question: *'What contributions can be made to enhance current theories and models which explain what works for effective engagement?'*.

The literature review demonstrated that a range of interlinked contextual factors will strongly impact on engagement processes, including: (i) the rationales underpinning engagement; (ii) the goals, objectives, and/or criteria of the decision-making process; (iii) design factors (including methodological choice); (iv) socio-economic and cultural dynamics (including participant characteristics); (v) political, legal, and governance factors (including organisational and/or institutional context); (vi) power dynamics; (vii) historical context; (viii) spatial context; and (viiii) temporal context (see Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Baker and Chapin, 2018; Bell and Reed, 2021; Reed *et al.*, 2018a; de Vente *et al.*, 2016; Wesselink *et al.*, 2011). There are a plethora of different models, theories, toolkits, guidance, and frameworks (etc.) for understanding how different factors shape the positive and negative outcomes of engagement (see Chapter 2). For the purpose of this discussion, two models are focused on: the wheel of participation (Reed *et al.,* 2018a) and the tree of participation (Bell and Reed, 2021). The wheel of participation - a widely cited and influential model in the relevant literature – makes a key contribution by accounting for the fact that different types of engagement will vary in different contexts. More recently, the tree of participation aimed to address tensions and shortfalls in existing models (including the wheel of participation) to devise a new model for participatory decision-making. Importantly, both models aim to embed contextual factors in participatory decision-making and were designed to be useful for those tasked with carrying out participatory processes (e.g., practitioners). The literature review (Chapter 2) explored different models, synthesised gaps, and justified the focus of the wheel and tree of participation models in this thesis. While these models remain useful and relevant, they do not consider how the factors which explain the outcomes of engagement can change in digital and remote environments, compared to in-person engagement (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Willis *et al.,* 2021). Another identified gap was that limited attention has been paid to organisational barriers and constraints (Baker and Chapin, 2018; Escobar, 2021; Wesselink). In addition, there is a gap in understanding practitioner perspectives and experiences of carrying out engagement (Lachapelle *et al.*, 2003; Wesselink *et al.*, 2011), particularly in relation to the intuitional structures and cultures within which they operate. Building on the strengths of existing models for participation, the following sections outline how this thesis contributes to the identified gaps and tensions.

It is important to note that although this thesis focuses on two specific models, the empirical and conceptual contributions of this thesis are likely to be more broadly relevant to other models for engagement and participatory processes more broadly (within and beyond the environment and planning sectors). For example, the recent OECD guidelines for citizen participation processes (which aim to provide internationally relevant and practical, hands-on support with an emphasis on ensuring quality, inclusion, and impact) included 'choosing the right digital tools' (including risks related to 'digital divides', available skills, and resource constraints) and 'fostering a culture of participation' (supported by embedding institutionalised participation practices) as part of a 'ten-step path of planning and implementing a citizen participation process' (OECD, 2022 p. 10-11). However, the OECD guidelines do not consider the challenges and opportunities for engagement in depth and there is significant potential for the findings of this research to feed-in to the existing knowledge base.

Informed by the results and discussion in sections 7.2 and 7.3, the following areas have been identified which contribute to models and theories for engagement: (i) the impact of digital tools on what works for engagement; (ii) in-depth recognition of the organisational barriers for engagement (and how they can be overcome); (iii) inclusion of practitioners' perspectives and experiences of the challenges and opportunities for carrying out engagement. Each of these contributions are discussed in more detail in the remainder of this section.

(i) Consideration of the impact of digital tools on what works for engagement.

It is important to consider the extent to which current models and theories for what works in engagement hold in an increasingly digitised world. This research has made novel contributions by providing, as far as the researcher can tell, the most comprehensive accounts of practitioners' perspectives of the factors that influence the effectiveness of engagement in digital, remote environments compared to in-person. The findings synthesise a wide range of issues and make unique contributions to the growing evidence base for the challenges and opportunities for digital engagement (e.g., Afzalan and Muller, 2018; Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Köpsel *et al.*, 2021; Manderscheid *et al.*, 2022; McKinley *et al.*, 2021; Panchyshyn and Corbett, 2022; Pantić *et al.*, 2021; Pham and Massey, 2018; Willis *et al.*, 2021). Existing models and theories for explaining the factors that shape the outcomes of engagement do not consider how the factors take on new dimensions in online (compared to offline) situations. For example, although the wheel and tree of participation models (Bell and

Reed, 2021; Reed *et al.,* 2018a) account for the factors related to transparency, trust, power, representation, and agency, they do not consider how these factors (and the dynamics between them) change when selecting different digital (remote), in-person, and hybrid methods. This thesis has shown that methodological choice remains a significant consideration for designing, implementing, and evaluating effective engagement processes.

It is proposed that users of the wheel and tree of participation draw on the findings of this study to expand their understanding of the challenges and opportunities for digital engagement. Building on the contextual factors that are incorporated in these models, it is recommended that the influence of methodological choice – particularly the substantive differences of remote compared to in-person engagement – is given more explicit attention throughout the engagement process, for example, when considering the pre-process and other design process factors. It is critical to explicitly account for the influence of digital tools on the process and outcomes for engagement in the future, as the boundaries between physical and digital worlds become increasingly blurred and enmeshed (e.g., Hudson-Smith, 2022).

(ii) In-depth exploration of a range of organisational constraints and how to overcome them.

Both the wheel and tree of participation consider organisational and institutional contextual factors including the existence of a participatory culture, past experiences of engagement, and the availability of adequate resources. However, the models do not account for the full range and complexity of the challenges for institutionalising engagement. There is also a lack of understanding of the organisational barriers for engagement (and how they can be overcome) in the wider literature - for example, although Arnstein's (1969) ladder (and subsequent models that have built on the ladder typology, e.g., IAP2, 2018) centres on the extent to which power is devolved to participants, it does not consider how organisational barriers can play a role in the extent to which higher levels of participation can be realistically achieved in practice (Wesselink *et al.*, 2011; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). In addition to creating a safe space, ensuring an inclusive process, and removing barriers for engagement for participants (e.g., Bell and Reed, 2021), the barriers and limitations for carrying out effective engagement within organisational and institutional structures need to be identified and mitigated for. This is important because organisational barriers have a significant impact on the process and outcomes of engagement, and/or whether engagement can even be conducted at all. For example, through its normative focus, the tree of participation focuses almost entirely on contextual factors which impact engagement participants (e.g., factors which can make engagement more or less inclusive and empowering for public and stakeholder participants). By doing so, it overlooks the perspectives and experiences of engagers (i.e., practitioners responsible for carrying out engagement processes). Although it is crucial that public and stakeholder participants remain at the heart of participatory decision-making processes, it is also important to consider the challenges which inhibit engagers' ability to carry out meaningful, inclusive, and effective engagement and how to mitigate them. As this thesis has evidenced (and is supported by the literature), the organisational context within which engagement is carried out is highly complex and can impact the extent to which it achieves the goals and intended benefits of engagement.

The success of engagement depends on the inclusion and empowerment of engagers, as well as the inclusion and empowerment of participants (this is built on in the section below). Any engagement process which aims to involve publics and stakeholders in decisions which affect their lives should also consider engagers' experiences of carrying out that process, taking into account a range of challenges and opportunities for institutionalising best practice. To be clear, this research proposes that practitioners' perspectives and organisational factors should be considered alongside contextual factors that are identified in existing models for participation, *not* as a replacement. Participants should remain at the heart of participation and a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of organisational contexts can enhance this. It is recommended that the findings related to practitioners' perspectives of institutionalising engagement are considered alongside existing models and theories, for example, when thinking about the existence of a participatory culture and past experiences of engagement.

(iii) Inclusion of practitioners' perspectives and experiences of the challenges and opportunities for undertaking effective engagement.

Building on the above point, the inclusion perspectives of those responsible for carrying out engagement is, at present, lacking in both the wheel and tree of participation (and in the wider literature). More broadly, there is a gap in the literature regarding practitioners' perspectives on the organisational constraints (and other barriers/issues) for carrying out effective engagement. This research has demonstrated the importance of reflecting on how engagement is understood, practiced, and implemented within organisations through a more realistic assessment of the challenges and opportunities (also see Escobar, 2021; Wesselink *et al.,* 2011). If practitioners' perspectives and experiences are not included when developing, refining, and implementing models for engagement, then the reality of organisational/institutional barriers (and how to overcome them) risks being overlooked. This includes important factors such as practitioners' capacity, capability, confidence, and agency to conduct engagement well, which are rooted in organisational cultures and wider socio-political systems. To ensure that engagement strategies are effective in the long term, it is essential that practitioners' voices are included alongside public and stakeholder participants.

At present, both the wheel and tree of participation lack explicit discussion of the importance of practitioners' perspectives and experiences. This is also true for other models, for example, while the OECD guidelines for participation (OECD, 2022) includes citizen input, feedback, and evaluation as a key step for planning and implementing participatory processes, there is no mention of recognising and mitigating organisational barriers and/or collecting feedback from the members of staff who are tasked with carrying out engagement.

By removing value judgements about different types of engagement (i.e., that some types of engagement are better or more effective than others), Reed *et al.* (2018a) create space for using whatever type of engagement is most appropriate for the given context and purpose. This is important when considering the perspectives of engagement practitioners because in some situations it will not always be possible, or indeed appropriate, to achieve particular types of engagement (e.g., co-production). However, this should only be the start of the conversation. In situations where more inclusive and emancipatory engagement is not realistically achievable, engagers (and engaging organisations) should understand and communicate the reasons why, identify any barriers to engagement (e.g., lack of skills and resources), and put in place strategies for overcoming barriers and mitigating risks in the future (e.g., upskilling and increasing resource capacity). This emphasises the importance of understanding and embedding engagement as a continuous, adaptable, and flexible process rather than as an 'add-on' activity to existing practices, which may require an institutionally embedded, or wider scale (e.g., sectoral or national government level), culture change

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has brought together the empirical chapters, and discussed within the context of the literature, to provide several novel contributions. Firstly, the research made significant empirical contributions to understanding the effectiveness of digital tools for meeting the goals and benefits of engagement. The research revealed that the fundamental contextual factors and socio-economic dynamics that shape the outcomes of engagement can take on new dimensions in digital, remote environments. In particular, this thesis drew on data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 which provided a unique situation to conduct research into digital engagement. Secondly, the research provided important understandings regarding the organisational barriers for engagement and how they can be overcome. The findings reveal that institutionalising engagement requires an in-depth understanding of the range of existing reasons for conducting engagement (and who's responsible for engaging) alongside current practices, assumptions, capacity, capability, expertise, agency, and a range of other barriers that are rooted in organisational/institutional (and wider socio-political) structures. Thirdly, this thesis builds on the rich qualitative findings to make a conceptual contribution to identified gaps in existing models and theories for engagement, focusing on the wheel of participation (Reed *et al.,* 2018a) and tree of participation (Bell and Reed, 2021). Future uses and adaptations of these models need to consider the following: (i) the impact of digital tools on what works for engagement processes (e.g., by considering the findings of this thesis as part of pre-process and design factor considerations); (ii) the complex and dynamic nature of organisational barriers and how they can be overcome, both in the short term and in the long-term by institutionally embedding engagement (e.g., the findings of this thesis can feed-in to current understandings of organisational/institutional contextual factors and how they influence processes and outcomes); (iii) the inclusion of practitioners perspectives and experiences of the challenges and opportunities for undertaking engagement (e.g., incorporated and embedded alongside the perspectives and experiences of public and stakeholder participants).

The findings make important contributions to several gaps identified in the existing literature. Although digital technology has been continuously transforming engagement processes for decades, there are still unanswered questions about the benefits of digital tools and their effectiveness at meeting the goals and criteria of engagement. These questions became increasingly urgent during the COVID-19 pandemic as technology-related disparities received a great deal of attention. The findings challenge prevailing attitudes of 'digital first' by underscoring that there is no one-size-fits all digital (remote), in-person, or hybrid approach to engagement: the effectiveness of engagement completely depends on the context in which it is needed. As far as the researcher can tell, this thesis has provided the most comprehensive account of how a range of different factors can change in digital and remote environments, compared to in-person situations. The literature review also revealed that while a great deal of the literature on engagement focuses on developing methods and articulating best practices, the organisational constraints for delivering effective engagement strategies are currently underexplored. Central to this is the importance of understanding practitioners' experiences of carrying out engagement within organisational/institutional structures and cultures: any engagement process that seeks to involve public and stakeholder groups should also consider engagers' own experiences of carrying out that process. The importance of understanding the views and experiences of engagement practitioners should be given much greater weight in both research and practice, to meet current gaps in understanding. It is essential that greater attention is paid to these issues in existing models and theories for explaining what works for engagement (as well as any guidance to steer practitioners through the engagement process), and this thesis has provided much-needed insights into whether two particular models (the wheel and tree of participation) hold for engagement in digital and remote environments.

The concluding chapter (Chapter 8) answers each of the research questions before making recommendations for policy and practice. This includes an outline of plans for the further dissemination of the research findings and engagement with non-academic stakeholders, as part of a broader strategy for impact.

Chapter 8: Conclusion and recommendations

The central aim of this thesis was to understand practitioners' perspectives on what works for effective public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes. The research was conducted within the context of the UK and was shaped by three research questions (see Chapter 1, section 1.3). This concluding chapter answers each of these research questions in turn (section 8.1) before making recommendations for policy and practice (section 8.2), including an outline of plans for further dissemination and engagement of the research findings. This chapter then considers some final reflections on carrying out participatory and interdisciplinary doctoral research (section 8.3). Sections 8.4 and 8.5 note the limitations of this study and highlights opportunities for future research, before making some final concluding remarks.

This thesis has produced a wealth of knowledge in a rapidly changing and accelerating sphere, providing useful and relevant findings for academia, policy, and practice alike. The research has successfully produced insights into practitioners' perspectives of the effectiveness of public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes in the UK. This thesis contributes to a gap in current knowledge by delivering an in-depth exploration of practitioners' perspectives of engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes, across different engagement contexts, and spanning a range of organisational settings including government departments, non-departmental public bodies, academic research, charities/not-for-profit organisations, and private industry. This thesis has made several important contributions to existing knowledge, which are discussed in section 8.1 in relation to each of the research questions.

The overarching findings of this research, and the recommendations for policy and practice that follow, have considerable relevance at a national scale (with broader relevance in the European Union and internationally as identified in Chapter 2). As Chapter 3 demonstrated, the research has already made important progress towards achieving this impact goal and has identified priority areas and mechanisms to achieve future impact (recommendations for policy and practice are outlined in section 8.2). The recommendations provided by this thesis are relevant to practitioners, policymakers, and researchers alike who seek to undertake engagement in planning and environmental decision-making (with relevance for decision-making arenas more broadly). The recommendations are also relevant to organisations that seek to embed and institutionalise an engagement culture. In the UK, practitioners and policy makers can consider the findings of this research when considering national commitments and legal requirements to engage including the Aarhus Convention, 25 Year Environment Plan, and a range of other policy and practice hooks relevant to UK Government departments, non-departmental public bodies, non-governmental organisations, local authorities, private industry, and so forth (e.g., Defra 2022; Hafferty, 2022; Natural England, 2020; also see Chapters 1 and 2 for a review of the relevant policy and practice context of this thesis). In addition, the findings and recommendations of this thesis challenge 'digital-by-default' and 'digital first'[90] narratives in the government's strategies for digital transformation (Cabinet Office, 2012; Government Digital Service, 2017; DLUHC, 2022; DDCMS, 2022).

As identified in the introductory chapter, at the time of writing this thesis the political climate with regards to environmental and social challenges is increasingly volatile and complex, with rapidly shifting Government priorities and heightened threats to nature and human health[91,92]. Of particular relevance to the findings of this thesis is the strong and united response from a range of key stakeholders (including environmental charities and non-governmental organisations) to put pressure on the Government to protect the environment and to engage members of the public and other stakeholder groups in these decisions[93,94]. Despite the Government's reiterated commitment to environmental protections[95], proposed deregulation and short-term goals for economic growth threaten to undermine future resilience, prosperity, and health: sustainable economic growth cannot be achieved without a healthy environment for people and for nature. Central to this is the need for more effective approaches for engaging public and stakeholder groups in environment and planning decision-making. The

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[90] Digital-by-default remains a strong narrative across the public sector from national to local levels, for example, the 14th Public Sector Innovation Conference in March 2022 (which the researcher attended) focused on the efficiency, interoperability, and 'limitless potential' of technology and data for building digitally-enabled public services, as well as the 'accelerated digital transformation' and 'rapid move towards digital first'. See the conference website online: https://digileaders.com/innovation-conference/ (last accessed September 2022).

[91] UK environment laws under threat in 'deregulatory free-for-all' (Laville, 2022), The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/sep/23/uk-environment-laws-under-threat-in-deregulatory-free-for-all.

[92] Nature-based Solutions Initiative statement on UK government announcements and their threat to nature (2022): https://www.naturebasedsolutionsinitiative.org/news/nbsi-statement-uk-government-announcements-nature/.

[93] 'Green, not grey': National Trust calls on Government to put environment at root of growth plans (2022):https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/services/media/green-not-grey-national-trust-calls-on-government-to-put-environment-at-root-of-growth-plans.

[94] People's Plan for Nature aims to give members of the public a voice in co-creating a vision for the future of UK nature, including a People's Assembly for Nature: https://peoplesplanfornature.org/.

[95] Government reiterates commitment to environmental protections (Defra Press Office, 2022): https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2022/09/28/government-reiterates-commitment-to-environmental-protections/.

findings and recommendations of outlined in this thesis in sections 8.1 and 8.3 are pertinent to these recent political changes and will be built upon in future research.

8.1 Summary of the key findings in this research

This section answers each of the research questions and outlines three novel contributions that were made by this thesis. The research has contributed significant knowledge to existing understandings of how different factors influence outcomes in engagement processes. Firstly, the research made empirical contributions to understandings of the effectiveness of digital tools for meeting the goals and benefits of engagement (Chapter 5), and understandings of the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising engagement (Chapter 6). The richness of the data presented in these chapters makes a strong contribution to knowledge as the highly empirical approach used has led to the collection of large amounts of qualitative data which can also be utilised in future research. Building on the empirical findings, this thesis makes a third conceptual contribution to identified gaps in existing models and theories that explain what works for public and stakeholder engagement (Chapter 7). Following the analysis of the qualitative data (Chapters 5 and 6) and consideration of the findings within the context of the wider literature (Chapter 7), this thesis highlighted three additional considerations for existing models and theories: (i) the consideration of the impact of digital tools on what works for engagement; (ii) the in-depth exploration of a range of organisational constraints and how to overcome them; (iii) the inclusion of practitioners' and practice-enablers' perspectives and experiences of the challenges and opportunities for undertaking effective engagement. These contributions are used to directly inform the recommendations outlined later in this chapter in section 8.2 and opportunities for future research included in section 8.4.

8.1.1 Digital tools for engagement

RQ1: How effective are digital tools for meeting the goals and benefits of engagement?

The key findings in relation to the first research question is that the fundamental contextual factors that shape the outcomes of engagement processes (e.g., inclusivity, power, trust, social dynamics) can take on new dimensions in digital and remote environments. This thesis has provided novel insights to a rapidly expanding body of literature by providing – as far as the researcher can tell – the most comprehensive range of challenges and opportunities for digital engagement to-date. The findings revealed how these factors are highly complex, interlinked, and context dependent: on one hand, in almost every situation where a digital tool or approach was used to increase the likelihood of engagement achieving beneficial outcomes (e.g., including more people in decision-making processes), there was another situation where these approaches could cause unintended negative consequences on the other hand (e.g., excluding people). Challenging attitudes of ‘digital first’ or ‘digital by default’, the research strongly emphasised that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to engagement and provided a considerable amount of data to support and explain why this is. The findings identified that a flexible, adaptable, and (where possible and appropriate) hybrid approaches (consisting of both digital and in-person methods) should be used to maximise the effectiveness of engagement and deliver its intended goals and benefits. The research provides further evidence that there is no single digital, in-person, or hybrid approach which guarantees successful engagement in all situations. The findings revealed the following key points for understanding the effectiveness of digital and remote tools for engagement:

(i) Innovation and creativity during COVID-19: Although digital tools were being used long before the pandemic, it led to an explosion of creativity and innovation for digital engagement which involved the use of a variety of different multimodal and multimedia technologies. While these tools had a variety of benefits such as incorporating different types of information, increasing accessibility, and creating more interactive experiences, they risked overwhelming engagers and participants, lacked interoperability, and could be perceived as gimmicky and lacking practical value.

(ii) Technology and resources: Practitioners experienced a range of technical issues and resource constraints and described ways to overcome them, which included careful planning and trialling digital tools.

(iii) Digital literacy and confidence: There was an increased opportunity for both engagers and participants to learn new digital skills during the pandemic, for example through trialling and testing new tools. However, there were also situations where key actors (including participants and engagers) lacked confidence in key digital skills which could exclude people and/or make them feel uncomfortable (or even nervous) engaging online.

(iv) Access and inclusion: On one hand, practitioners felt that digital tools were more inclusive of public and stakeholder participants (compared to in-person methods), for example due to the increased efficiency and flexibility of these tools. On the other hand, there were various situations where engagement was perceived to exclude ‘harder to reach’ stakeholders. Despite the rhetoric around digital inclusions and exclusions, practitioners highlighted that they often lacked the data and/or feedback to evidence this.

(v) Power relations: Practitioners explained that digital technology can be used to create a more equal platform that can reduce power politics between participants, those responsible for engaging, and other key actors. However, digital engagement can still be dominated by unequal power dynamics that are fundamental to all engagement processes. In some situations, practitioners felt that it was more difficult managing power imbalances online compared to in-person.

(vi) Social interaction and connection: Compared to in-person methods, digital engagement can restrict important social and contextual cues that can constrain the extent to which the following are achieved: in-depth and nuanced discussion; informal and spontaneous discussion; the recognition of non-verbal cues; the capture and interpretation of local contextual data. This can have a negative impact on engagement and its outcomes.

(vii) Trust and transparency: In some situations, practitioners identified that it was more difficult to build and maintain trusting relationships in digital and remote environments and importance of in-person methods for building trust and rapport with participants was emphasised. Some practitioners explained that advice and guidance conveyed by digital tools helped to enhance transparency and credibility during the engagement process, whereas others were concerned about the increased risk of miscommunication and bias.

(viii) Privacy, security, and well-being: For some practitioners, there were no additional privacy and security considerations for digital engagement compared to in-person. Others provided rich insights into a variety of issues including confidentiality and anonymity, bias, data ownership, and digital ethics. Issues regarding digital fatigue and impacts on mental health and well-being were also raised.

(ix) Feedback and evaluation: Feedback is understood in different ways across different areas of research and practice. In this study, practitioners described that feedback was often informal and anecdotal, rather than collected as part of a systematic and embedded evaluation process. This was highlighted as a key area for improvement as part of embedding engagement as a long-term process in organisations and institutions, with a clear need for an embedded system for collecting feedback, monitoring compliance, and evaluation.

8.1.2 Institutionalising engagement

> **RQ2:** What are the challenges for institutionalising engagement and how can they be overcome?

To be successful in the long term, it is vital that any engagement process (regardless of the digital or in-person methods used) is institutionalised. The findings in relation to the second research question revealed interlinked organisational factors that can constrain or enable the effectiveness of engagement. These factors enable an in-depth understanding of how the goals of engagement can be at variance with the organisational and institutional structures within which they are carried out, including ways that identified risks and barriers can be mitigated and overcome. Rather than focusing on improving methods and articulating best practices, the findings build on RQ1 by understanding the more fundamental reasons why many of these challenges are encountered at an organisational level (an issue which is currently underexplored). The findings reveal that institutionalising engagement requires an in-depth understanding of the range of existing reasons for conducting engagement (and whose responsibility it is to engage) alongside current practices, assumptions, expertise, agency, capacity, capability, and a range of other organisational barriers. Although the presence and interaction of some challenges can be considered to be the immediate cause of unsuccessful engagement, ultimately, the research demonstrated that the basis for all of these barriers is organisational in nature – that is, rooted in organisational cultures – and thus may require a culture change to mitigate risks in the long term. The findings revealed the following points for understanding the challenges and opportunities for institutionalising engagement:

(i) Roles and resources: A number of challenges were identified including the availability of resources (e.g., time, funding, skills, and human resources), the clarity of roles and responsibilities (e.g., what engagement requires and who is responsible). The availability (or lack of) adequate resources can restrict practitioners' capacity and capability to engage. It is crucial to scope resource availability in each situation where engagement is conducted including highlighting existing resources, gaps, and areas for improvement.

(ii) Skills and confidence: Practitioners highlighted how particular skills (and confidence levels in utilising these skills) were essential for carrying out effective engagement. Organisations play a key role in undermining and/or developing their staff's skills and confidence in engaging. In some situations, practitioners can feel nervous (or even fearful) in engaging due to a number of perceived risks including conflict, legal implications, and repercussions from not being 'on message', among others. Investing in the development of both technical and people skills for engagement (including communication, active listening, empathy, and dispute resolution) were highlighted as essential for building confidence in engaging. Skills and confidence can be developed by scoping existing skills and expertise, highlighting gaps, upskilling, and embedding training pathways supported by dedicated staff and/or teams.

(iii) Managing expectations: Public and stakeholder participants often have pre-conceived (positive or negative) views of the organisations and/or staff members tasked with carrying out engagement. For example, participants can have negative expectations of the engagement process due to the nature of relationships between participants and the organisation and/or previous encounters with staff. The complexity of stakeholder views can make it difficult to manage expectations. It is critically important that engagers are realistic about constraints (e.g., lack of resources) and that the outcome may not satisfy all parties (e.g., what is on/off the table in terms of discussion, who can be involved, and the extent to which stakeholders can influence the decision-making process and outcomes).

(iv) Agency: There are a number of challenges that can constrain practitioners' ability to carry out and engagement and/or choose how it is conducted. Lack of individual agency (i.e., the agency of the engager) can make it difficult to manage expectations with stakeholders during the engagement process. Organisational barriers do not operate in isolation from one another, and issues related to agency can be influenced by trust dynamics, for example, some practitioners felt that their organisation did not trust them to engage. It is crucial that organisations and institutions adequately support and empower their staff to carry out engagement.

(v) Embedding engagement as a long-term process: Engagement should not be considered as an 'add-on' activity to existing practices. Instead, engagement must be institutionalised as part of a long-term, dynamic, and continuously evolving process. This should involve guidance with clear steps/stages to navigate engagers throughout the engagement process and beyond. Guidance and support should be carefully adapted to the needs of staff across different parts of the organisation, which should start with a clear understanding of existing approaches for engagement while highlighting any gaps, training needs, and other requirements. The long-term success of engagement depends on organisational (and/or sector wide, or national) minimal requirements and standards for engagement, alongside an embedded system for monitoring compliance and evaluation. Ultimately, engagement needs to be embedded as part of an organisation's core vision, mission, and strategy, with clear goals and objectives, while empowering staff to engage, and promoting joined-up thinking and knowledge sharing across organisational and sectoral silos.

8.1.3 Contributing to existing models and theories

> **RQ3:** Building on the previous two research questions, what contributions can be made to enhance current theories and models which explain what works for effective engagement?

Answering this third and final research question brought together the findings in relation to RQ2 and RQ3 to contribute to identified gaps in existing models and theories for engagement.

Specifically, this research contributed to two selected models: the wheel of participation (Reed *et al.,* 2018a) and the tree of participation (Bell and Reed, 2021). The evidence from this study and the wider literature suggests that a range of contextual factors and socio-economic dynamics strongly influence the outcomes of engagement processes. While an overabundance of different models, typologies, guidelines, toolkits (and so forth) exist, these models were selected because they enable contextual factors to be considered and embedded in engagement processes through a flexible and adaptable approach. The findings made three key contributions to identified gaps in these models:

(i) Consideration of the impact of digital tools on what works for engagement: One major gap identified was that the wheel and tree of participation do not consider how the factors that shape effective engagement can change in digital and remote environments. While the processes underpinning engagement remains subject to a range of intrinsic contextual factors and dynamics, this thesis supports and adds novel insights to a growing body of literature that indicates that these factors take on new dimensions in digital (remote) environments, compared to in-person situations. Building on the contextual factors that are currently considered in the wheel and tree of participation, this thesis proposed that the role and influence of methodological choice (e.g., the effectiveness of digital and remote compared to in-person engagement) is given more explicit attention as part of pre-process and design factors included in these models.

(ii) More in-depth recognition of the organisational barriers for engagement (and how they can be overcome): Although the wheel and tree of participation consider organisational and institutional factors to an extent, they do not account for the full range of reasons why the goals of engagement may be at conflict with the structures and cultures of the organisations tasked with carrying out these processes. Both models would benefit from a more-depth and explicit consideration of the range of organisational (and institutional) barriers and opportunities, inclusive of those revealed by RQ2. In addition to creating a safe space, ensuring an inclusive process, and removing barriers for engagement for participants (e.g., Bell and Reed, 2021), the barriers and limitations for carrying out effective engagement within organisational structures need to be identified and mitigated for. Through their normative focus, models like the tree of participation overlook the values and experiences of the practitioners responsible for carrying out engagement processes. It is essential that these perspectives are considered because, as this thesis has demonstrated, organisational barriers have a significant impact on the process and outcomes of engagement (or whether engagement can even be conducted at all).

(iii) Inclusion of practitioners' perspectives and experiences of the challenges and opportunities for carrying out engagement: Building on the above point, existing models and theories must include and embed the perspectives those responsible for carrying out engagement. This is inclusive of the wheel of participation, tree of participation, and others such as the IAP2 spectrum and Arnstein's ladder. Any engagement process that aims to involve members of the public and other stakeholders in decisions which affect their lives should also consider engagers' experiences of carrying out that process. This should involve a realistic reflection on a range of challenges for institutionalising engagement (both in the short and long term) and how they can be overcome. Although participants should remain at the heart of engagement processes, practitioners' perspectives should be considered alongside these to enable a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how different contextual factors influence the outcomes of engagement. This is a win-win for effective engagement: if practitioners are able to conduct engagement more effectively within organisational structures and cultures, then this will help increase the likelihood that engagement processes are more equitable, inclusive, trustworthy, and work to empower public and stakeholder participants.

To embed these three contributions in strategies for more effective engagement, the key thinking points and recommendations provided by this research can be considered alongside existing theories, models, frameworks, guidelines, toolkits (etc.) as part of a broader strategy. The thinking points that have been outlined in this section, which directly inform the recommendations included in the subsequent section (section 8.2), can be used as a complementary additional resource to add depth and nuance to current understandings of the factors that influence (positive and negative) outcomes in engagement.

8.2 Recommendations for policy and practice

The core impact goal of this thesis was to enhance existing practices for public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making processes in the UK. The research aimed to achieve this goal by producing evidence that meets gaps in current understanding and can contribute to existing models (and guidance, toolkits, frameworks, etc.) for what works. The research aimed to disseminate the findings to potential users and beneficiaries (e.g., through evidence reports, briefs, blog posts, social media, infographics, and webinars), engage closely with specific stakeholders to understand their needs and requirements, and collect feedback about the utility of the evidence provided. Longer term (beyond the timeline and resource capacity of this PhD project), the evidence produced by this research (section 8.1) will be tested with wider stakeholder groups with the aim of enhancing and (further) embedding more effective engagement processes across environment and planning organisations in the UK public, private, and third sectors.

With regards to evaluating progress against the impact goal, this thesis has made important steps towards achieving impact. This includes significant progress in terms of the production of evidence, understanding the needs and requirements of stakeholders, and disseminating the findings to potential users and beneficiaries of the research (see Chapter 3 and Appendix A). The abundance of knowledge produced by this thesis has led to the development of a series of recommendations (section 8.2.1) which can help achieve the long-term impact goals in the future.

8.2.1 10 thinking points for engagement in the digital age

The recommendations produced by this research take the form of 10 key thinking points for effective engagement in the digital age. These are aimed at engagers (e.g., policymakers, practitioners, and practice-enablers) who aim to involve various participants (members of the public and other stakeholders) with planning and environmental decision-making processes. They are relevant to organisations that seek to embed an engagement culture, and/or practitioners that seek to undertake more effective engagement strategies. While the recommendations are based on evidence that focuses on environment and planning decision-making, they are likely to be more broadly relevant to any individual or group interested in public and stakeholder engagement.

It is intended that the following thinking points are used to complement existing practices, models, guidelines, toolkits, frameworks (and so forth). The purpose of the recommendations is to add depth and breadth to existing understandings of effective engagement by building on resources that are already developed and widely accessible, rather than to act as a replacement for existing practices and/or to propose a new model for best practice. It is suggested that the following key thinking points are used flexibly to explore what works in particular engagement situations; practitioners and organisations can use the thinking points as prompts for consideration throughout the engagement process (*'Does this thinking point apply in this situation? If so, how can we achieve benefits and mitigate risks? If it does not apply, how do we know this, and why might this be?'*). Specifically, the thinking points enhance understandings of design process factors (the selection of the most appropriate and effective methods) and organisational/institutional factors (how effective engagement can be delivered and embedded within organisational structures).

The **10 key thinking points for engagement in the digital age** produced by this research are included below and summarised in **Figure 23.**

1. **Creativity and innovation:** Think carefully about the appropriateness and practicality of digital tools and technologies. It can be tempting to select software platforms and tools based on the lure of innovative features and efficient digital solutions. However, it is important to think critically about how they will be used and the context that they will be used in, for example, by asking the questions: 'What are we trying to achieve? Is this digital tool the best way to achieve this? If so, what can we use it for and how do we know this? If not, what alternatives are available and what are their benefits?'.

2. **Technology and resources:** There will always be technical issues and resource constraints that can impact the quality and reliability of engagement processes. Ways to overcome them include careful planning, identifying risks, and trialling digital tools.

3. **Digital skills and confidence:** Lack of skills and confidence can be a barrier to effective engagement, and it is important to think about the specific skills that are required. This includes the skills required for public and stakeholder participants to become fully involved, as well as the skills that engagers have themselves to carry out engagement. Digital engagement can provide an opportunity to develop digital skills.

4. **Access and inclusion:** Identify potential digital inclusions and exclusions before engaging and consider how consider they might change throughout the engagement process. Although digital tools can be more accessible for some people than in-person methods, they can always exclude and/or marginalise others. It is essential to collect data and feedback to provide evidence for who is (or could be) included and excluded.

5. **Power relations:** Managing power imbalances is always going to be important for effective engagement. However, power dynamics can change when engaging online – they can become more equal (e.g., digital can be a 'leveller' compared to in-person) or more unequal (e.g., digital can widen inequalities and it can be more difficult to manage power imbalances online compared to in-person). It is important to identify unequal power dynamics early on and consider how these can be mitigated.

6. **Social interaction and connection:** Social relationships are essential for effective engagement and understanding complex issues. Digital engagement can restrict important aspects of person-to-person social interaction and discussion, including informality and non-verbal cues. This can have negative impacts on the engagement process and its outcomes (e.g., reduced trust and rapport). It is important to think about

if and how high-quality social interaction can be achieved online (and get feedback from participants). In some situations, in-person methods will be more effective.

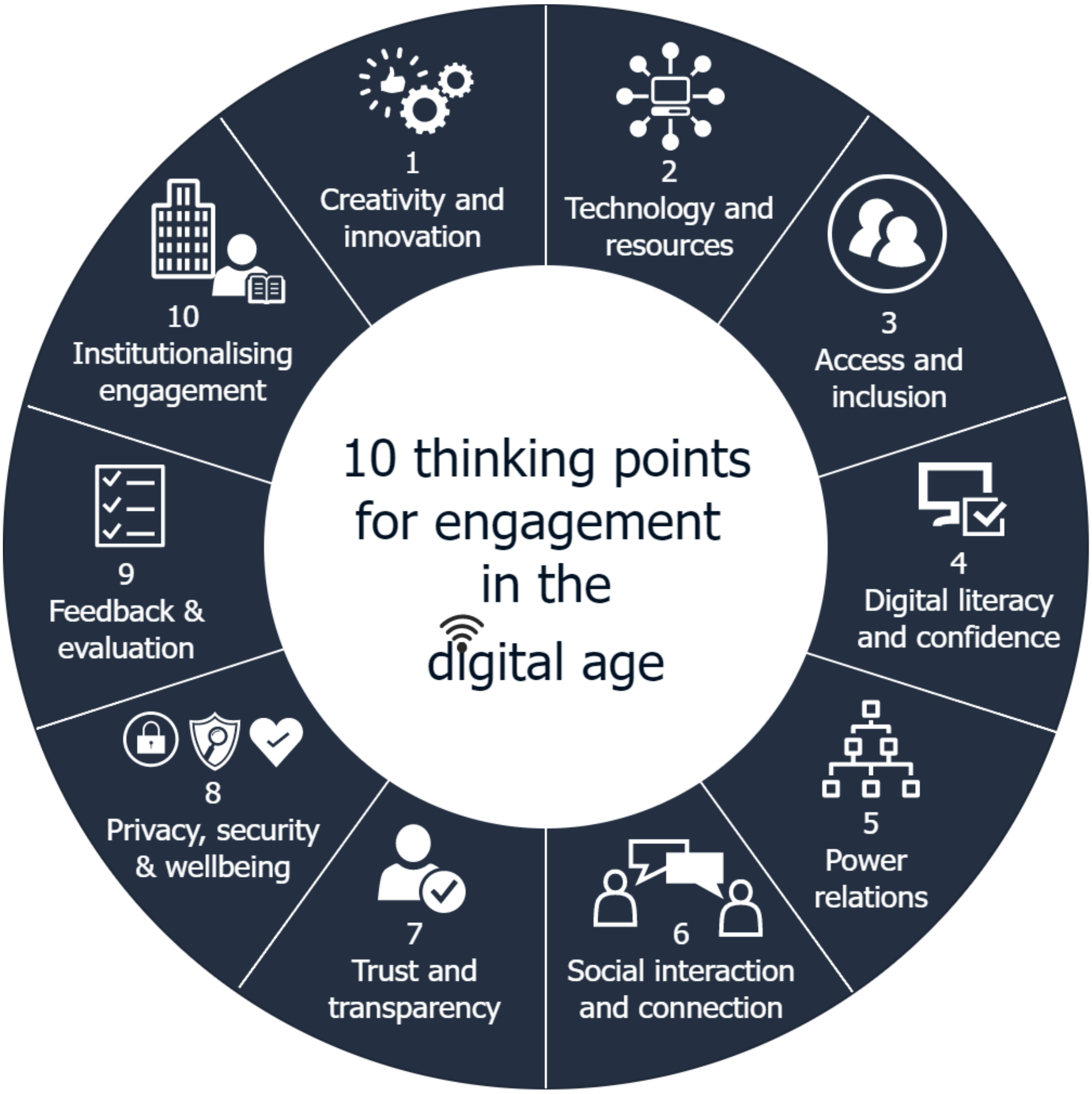
7. **Trust and transparency:** It can be difficult to build and maintain trusting relationships in digital and remote environments. Sometimes, it will be more appropriate to form relationships with participants in-person before they are engaged with digitally. In other situations, dedicating time to develop relationships informally online (e.g., before the formal engagement process) can help to build trust. While digital tools and platforms can increase the transparency and credibility of decisions and the information that they are based on, they can also enhance risks of bias and miscommunication.

8. **Privacy, security, and well-being:** Mitigating risks related to privacy and security will be in accordance with organisational and legal regulations and responsibilities. However, there are particular considerations for digital engagement which need to be identified and mitigated including participant confidentiality and anonymity, bias, data ownership and control, and digital ethics. It is also important to think about the impact of engaging online on mental health and well-being, including digital fatigue.

9. **Feedback and evaluation:** It is essential that regular feedback is collected from participants about digital (and any) engagement process. Organisations and engagers can lack data about participants' experiences of engagement and also lack robust evidence to support whether engagement is successful. Engagement should always be evaluated continuously throughout the process (and beyond) which can be embedded as part of an organisational strategy for embedding effective engagement (see the below point).

10. **Institutionalising engagement:** To be successful in the long term, it is vital that engagement is institutionalised, which means embedding the principles and practices of effective engagement into existing decision-making structures in a way that they become the norm. This often requires embedding engagement as part of a long-term culture change. This requires an in-depth understanding of the reasons why engagement is conducted as well as current practices, assumptions, expertise, capacity, capability, agency, and a range of other organisational and institutional barriers. Engagement must be recognised as a long-term, dynamic, and continuously evolving process rather than an 'add-on' activity to existing practices.

Figure 23. 10 thinking points for engagement in the digital age. *Source: original diagram by the author.*



8.2.1 Dissemination, engagement, and impact plans

In each of the qualitative interviews conducted as part of this thesis, practitioners were asked about their thoughts on the utility of the findings of the research for their work (see Chapter 5, section 5.11.2). Practitioners emphasised a need for case study examples of what works (and what does not work). In particular, existing guidance for engagement could be too focused on benefits and 'best practices' rather than identifying and mitigating risks. In addition, practitioners described the importance of promoting knowledge sharing between (and within) different organisations and breaking down siloes in different governance and decision-making contexts, both within and beyond planning and environmental decision-making. Practitioners emphasised the value of learning from others' experiences (e.g., through case studies) and highlighted the value of learning from mistakes. In terms of the ways in which the findings of this research could be disseminated, practitioners suggested a range of approaches including online resources (e.g., a guidance booklet, website, Wikipedia page), podcasts, webinars, training sessions, and/Hoor a combination of different materials.

Inspired by practitioners' suggestions, the researcher has already engaged with stakeholders and disseminated the findings in a variety of different ways (see Chapter 3 and Appendix A). To help realise participants' suggestions and achieve the impact goal of this research, a long-term plan has been devised for the future. This involves sharing the key thinking points (those identified in section 8.2.1) via a guidance booklet, which could be shared with the participants of this research and other interest groups, potential users and beneficiaries. The literature review of this thesis has already been published in collaboration with Natural England (a key stakeholder in the research) as an evidence report (Hafferty, 2022) which has also been disseminated via a free infographic resource pack[96] and on social media. The empirical results of this thesis can be shared in a similar manner via infographics and social media. There is significant potential to test and adapt the findings of this thesis in different environmental decision-making contexts and scale this up beyond the UK. Alongside this research, the researcher plans to continue to engage with (and contribute findings to) the work of Natural England and other stakeholder organisations to institutionalise effective strategies for stakeholder engagement. For example, the researcher has already contributed findings from this research to Defra's Social Science Expert Group review of public engagement (Defra, 2022) and plans to continue engaging with the UK Government on issues related to engagement. Connecting with a broader audience of consultation and engagement

[96] Infographic resource back, based on Hafferty (2022): https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/11434/.

practitioners, t the research findings have also been shared to a practitioner audience at The Consultation Institute's 2022 conference as a guest speaker[97].

Beyond the initial steps made towards achieving impact from this thesis, there is considerable future potential to build on the interviewees' suggestions for disseminating the research in useful, accessible, and relevant ways (and collecting feedback on what works). Building on the findings of this thesis, the ultimate goal is to develop accessible, relevant, and (where possible) timely guidance for effective engagement – including case study examples to illustrate both challenges and opportunities - which can be continuously adapted and evaluated in collaboration with users and other potential beneficiaries.

8.3 Final reflections on interdisciplinary and participatory research

This thesis not only sought to explore and enhance public and stakeholder engagement processes by responding to the three research questions, but also utilised engagement as central part of the research approach. As discussed in Chapter 3, the research approach was problem-oriented, impact-focused, and aimed to be agile in responding to the needs of potential users and beneficiaries of the research. The research was achieved this by shaping testing and adapting the research questions and aims with non-academic stakeholders, which directly led to changes in the research (see Chapter 3). By successfully navigating challenges and re-orienting the research according to the needs of potential users and beneficiaries, this thesis has shown how research can be agile in responding to current and unexpected issues to produce research that is relevant to policy and practice (while also making key contacts and links for future research and dissemination).

The significance of interdisciplinary, engaged, and agile research that can rapidly respond to policy and practice issues is an important and rapidly expanding area of research[98]. These approaches are also becoming increasingly prevalent in doctoral studies and research more broadly (e.g., Holley, 2015; Strengers, 2014), with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and other prominent funding bodies strengthening their commitment to supporting an enhanced culture of interdisciplinary and collaborative research in the UK and beyond (e.g., ESRC, 2022a, 2022b; also see UKRI CASE studentships). The researcher's experiences and

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[97] The researcher presented the findings of the research at The Consultation Institute Connect 2022 conference, 6th October 2022: https://www.consultationinstitute.org/connect2022/speakers/caitlin-hafferty-2/. The slides from this presentation are available here: https://www.consultationinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Ludgate-Room-Merged-Presentations-Connect-2022.pdf.

[98] For example, see the University of Exeter's ACCESS project: https://greenfutures.exeter.ac.uk/access/; and the University of Oxford's Agile Initiative: https://www.agile-initiative.ox.ac.uk/.

critical reflections on carrying out this PhD project, while also engaging with non-academic stakeholders and rapidly adapting the research to overcome a variety of challenges (discussed in Chapter 3), not only provides further evidence for how doctoral research can be conducted in an agile and solution-focused manner (e.g., utilising the activities outlined in Appendix A) but also provides an important opportunity to build on these learnings in the future. For example, future research could include exploring the ethical implications of these approaches and their impacts on researcher well-being (see Chapter 3).

Conducting interdisciplinary and participatory research also considerably shaped the researcher's personal development and transition to post-doctoral research. Engaging with non-academic stakeholders strengthened the researcher's personal values that research should remain useful and relevant beyond academia to make a positive and meaningful change in the world. The journey of carrying out this PhD transformed the researcher's perspective of the reasons why research should be conducted, what it should include, and who it should be for. The researcher gained an in-depth understanding of the critical importance of responding to specific social and environmental policy questions with problem- and solution-focused research to deliver research when it is needed to feed-in to practice in real-time. This included learning about the importance of sharing research findings in an accessible and relevant manner (see Chapter 3 and Appendix A). Central to this has been: actively listening to and working with potential users and beneficiaries; recognising different timescales at which PhD projects and practitioners/policy-makers work; communicating research in an accessible and digestible manner; respecting and valuing different knowledge types; being open to having assumptions challenged; being responsive to (and learning from) challenges, risks, and mistakes. Ultimately, this experience has shaped the researcher's professional and personal development, facilitating a journey towards becoming an interdisciplinary and engaged early career researcher who is keen to make a difference. It has (re)framed the researcher's perspective on participatory research and what it means to be a participatory researcher, from viewing 'participation' as a method or approach towards a 'way of being' (Rigolot, 2020) that is embedded in the researcher's personal values and aspirations. With these learnings in mind, there is significant potential new horizons and opportunities to unfold as the researcher's career progresses beyond the PhD.

8.4 Limitations and future research opportunities

There are several limitations to this thesis that provide avenues for future research. While the research aimed to produce insights into practitioners' perspectives of the challenges and opportunities for public and stakeholder engagement in the digital age, as with any research project (Teddlie and Yu, 2007) there is always a trade-off between depth and breadth. In the case of this thesis, the research produced a considerable amount of in-depth qualitative data which delivered broad insights into a number of key thinking points for engagement in the digital age. The thesis provided (as far as the researcher can tell) the most comprehensive overview to-date of the range of different factors that shape the outcomes of engagement and how they can change in digital and remote environments, with a particular focus on contributing novel insights into more fundamental organisational factors. As a consequence, the findings could be critiqued as being too broad and lacking conceptual depth; as the literature review demonstrated, there is a wealth of existing research on the factors that influence participation including power dynamics, trust, and inclusion in participatory processes (enough to complete an entire thesis on each factor) and it was not possible for this thesis to consider every factor in depth. Future research should consider the empirical contributions of this thesis as a starting point for understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with these factors, while acknowledging that there is a wealth of available information to help consider them in more detail. For example, if a researcher or practitioner was to operationalise the key thinking points (section 8.2) produced by this thesis, it is necessary to identify and understand which are the most salient issues within a given context (and what additional issues might be present, etc.). Future research is required to consider how the contributions made by this thesis can be understood in different contexts and at varying levels of depth and breadth, as well as uncover what additional considerations and dynamics exist.

In addition to the above, a further limitation is that this research was only focused on the UK. The findings have wider relevance for policy and practice in Europe and also internationally (see Chapters 1 and 2, also see a brief summary in the first section of this chapter) so there is significant potential for future research to scale up the findings and consider the extent to which they apply to international settings with different governance, political, and societal structures. It is also important that future research explores the dynamics of engagement with regards to tackling environmental issues at various scales and levels of severity, which is particularly significant amidst the global climate and ecological crisis. Another limitation of this thesis is that the findings did not reveal how temporal scales can influence engagement. Future research could consider how temporal factors take on new dimensions in digital and remote environments and/or which specific organisational factors can work to constrain (and enable) the extent to which the length and frequency of engagement can be matched to the goals of the process. As Chapter 3 identified, this research did not consider how the challenges and opportunities for effective engagement in relation to specific different types of engagement (e.g., information provision, consultation, involvement, co-production, and so forth), nor did it consider the differences between different digital tools (which are more effective at conducting particular types of engagement; see Chapter 2 section 2.6.1). Instead, this thesis provided a comprehensive range of themes across a variety of different engagement approaches in different settings. While this is a strength within the context of this study (the research has shown that there are common themes across a variety of different engagement and organisational contexts which are worthy of further exploration), future research should consider the extent to which the findings and key thinking points produced by this thesis change between different types/levels of engagement and different tools/methods.

As identified in Chapter 1 and the glossary, this thesis uses the term ‘effective’ to describe an engagement process that is successful in producing a desired or intended result (i.e., achieving the identified goals and benefits of engagement). The use of this term, like similar terms including ‘best practice’, ‘successful’ and/or ‘meaningful’ (e.g., Reed, 2008; Willis *et al.*, 2021) will likely raise issues and questions among critical social scientists in particular regarding precisely *what* and *who* the engagement process is for and to what effect (among other important questions, e.g., see Chambers, 2006). Using terms like ‘effective’ can work to mask the complexity of the contextual factors and socio-economic dynamics that influence positive and negative outcomes in engagement. Future research should recognise this limitation and aim to re-frame the narrative around engagement away from effectiveness and towards focusing explicitly on the factors that influence outcomes associated with engagement and broader participatory processes. In addition, the term ‘stakeholder’ (which has been used throughout this thesis) has been identified as problematic (see Chapter 2, section 2.2) and a new term is needed that does not risk causing harm. However, future research also needs to appreciate that many of these terms are widely used, embedded, and hold a variety of different meaning in research, policy, and practice spheres alike. Future research must embrace this complexity and be clear about why particular terms are used, what they mean in specific contexts, identify any potential risks to cause harm, and consider the use and/or development of alternative terminologies.

In conceptual terms, this thesis affirms the need to understand the extent to which existing theories and models for engagement hold for engagement in the digital age. The research has demonstrated that some factors that explain the outcomes for engagement do take on new dimensions in digital and remote environments. The research also identified that the significance of practitioners’ perspectives and organisational barriers are underplayed. Future research is needed to consider how else this can be achieved, drawing on a range of other theories from multiple disciplines and areas of practice. Ultimately, it is critical that the focus of research and practice surrounding engagement is shifted away from developing methods and articulating best practices, towards understanding the more fundamental reasons why challenges are encountered (and how they can be overcome).

8.5 Concluding remarks

This thesis has contributed knowledge to understandings of effective public and stakeholder engagement in the digital age within a UK context. It has contributed knowledge from the perspective of practitioners and practice-enablers who are tasked with carrying out engagement processes, which is at present a currently under-explored area of research.

The research has provided an in-depth exploration of the effectiveness of digital tools at meeting the goals and benefits of engagement. Challenging prevailing attitudes among researchers, practitioners, and policy makers alike of ‘digital by default’ and ‘digital first’, this thesis indicates that there is no single digital, in-person, or hybrid approach which guarantees successful engagement in all situations. In particular, the findings suggest that it is not possible to effectively replicate the value of human-to-human physical interaction in all engagement contexts. These findings are essential to consider in an increasingly digitised world, where physical and virtual worlds are becoming increasingly entwined. This is significant as rapid advances are made in virtual reality, augmented reality, and other immersive digital experiences with pressing new questions for research and practice – for example, how will the metaverse (e.g., see Hudson-Smith and Shakeri, 2022) transform how we engage and interact with other people, both online and within physical spaces? Despite considerable optimism about the opportunities for digital engagement and digital futures, technological innovations need to be approached with more responsibility and precaution. We need to base decisions on stronger empirical evidence of what works, what does not, and how the fundamental principles for engagement take on new dimensions in digital environments.

To be successful in the long term, any engagement process (regardless of the tools and methods used) needs to be institutionalised as part of the culture, governance, and decision-making structures of the organisations responsible for carrying out engagement. This thesis has responded to calls for a stronger evidence base for institutionalising engagement processes by contributing knowledge regarding practitioners’ perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for undertaking engagement within organisational settings. When developing more effective strategies for public and stakeholder engagement, the findings highlight the significance of considering a range of organisational barriers (and how to overcome them) alongside other contextual and socio-economic factors. Undertaking an organisational cultural shift is a complex task and any work to embed engagement needs to be taken with a good understanding of the range of existing reasons for engagement, along with current practices, assumptions, expertise, capacity, capability, agency, participant perspectives, and a range of other organisational issues.

Overall, the findings both support and contribute novel insights to current theories and models (e.g., Bell and Reed, 2021; Reed *et al.*, 2018a) which emphasise the need to match the engagement process to suit the context and purpose in which it is needed. This includes contributing factors that are uniquely important for digital engagement and producing novel insights from the perspective of engagement practitioners. This research has suggested 10 thinking points for effective engagement in the digital age which can be used in policy and practice to enhance existing guidelines, models, and toolkits for more effective engagement strategies in an increasingly digitised world.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Engagement and dissemination

This appendix is a supplementary material to Chapter 3 and includes details of the engagement and dissemination activities undertaken throughout the PhD research. This thesis aimed to embed engagement and outreach as a fundamental part of how the research was carried out. The research was grounded in an interdisciplinary and participatory approach that was problem-oriented, impact-focused, and aimed to be agile in responding to the needs of potential users and beneficiaries of the research. This approach involved engagement with non-academic stakeholders, which continuously shaped the research process and directly led to changes in the research. Engagement and dissemination activities included invited talks and webinars, blog posts, articles, reports, infographics, academic and non-academic conferences, and additional activities through both non-academic and academic research groups. These activities enabled the researcher to engage with non-academic stakeholders and take meaningful steps towards achieving impact.

This information is included here to demonstrate the range of activity that shaped this thesis, showing how interdisciplinary, engaged, and agile doctoral research can be conducted while recognising difficulties and barriers, being reflexive, learning from mistakes and sharing the lessons learned. However, it is also important to keep in mind what is realistically achievable during a doctoral programme (e.g., considering time and resource constraints) while considering individual contexts, privileges, and responsibilities alongside systemic barriers and inequalities within and beyond academia. It is important to be mindful that engagement activities are not necessarily going to be possible, appropriate, or effective in all situations. Any impact-focused activities need to be undertaken with care, mindfulness, and reflexivity.

Website and social media

A website was set up at the start of the PhD to disseminate the research, publish blog posts, and share links to talks, writing, infographics, and other external resources. This blog/website was a valuable ‘hub’ for bringing together engagement and outreach activities throughout the PhD journey. This was essential for sharing information with non-academic stakeholders in a clear and accessible format. The PhD blog/website is online here: https://caitlinhafferty.blogspot.com/. The website was used alongside the researcher’s Twitter and LinkedIn pages to disseminate information and resources to non-academic audiences. Twitter was a particularly effective way to share blog posts, recordings of talks, infographics, and other online materials using relevant hashtags and/or tagging in relevant groups and organisations[99]. Due to the varied efforts made to disseminate the research findings, while sharing resources and lessons learned on social media, the researcher's blog/website has (at the time of writing) been viewed over 19,000 times.

Contributing evidence

Contributing evidence from the PhD research to relevant reviews led by UK Government departments and non-departmental public bodies was a highly effective way of disseminating the research, while also improving the researcher's understanding of the wider policy/practice context in which the research could achieve impact. These opportunities were a significant step forward in the journey to achieving non-academic impact. Publishing reports, blog posts, participating in talks, and engaging on social media (Twitter) significantly helped to publicise the research and facilitate these opportunities (the following sections provide some examples of how this was done).

- Expert contributor to the Defra Science Advisory Council (SAC) Social Science Expert Group (SSEG) Review of Public Engagement (as one of 24 invited UK experts).
    - This review is published online: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1110705/Public_Engagement_Review_10_October_2022.pdf.
- Evidence was contributed to Natural England at various stages throughout the PhD process, including through a contracted research internship and the publication of an evidence review that was grounded in the research (see below section). Feedback was received that this review formed the foundation upon which the organisation will continue to embed a best practice culture of engagement.
- Evidence was contributed to a UK Parliament POST (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology) horizon scan, 'Life beyond Covid: What are experts concerned about?', as one of 366 responses. This response was informed by the research findings, including reflections on the impacts of Covid-19 on the development of future technologies and implications for society/communities.
    - This is available online: https://post.parliament.uk/life-beyond-covid-19-what-are-experts-concerned-about/.

[99]For example, the researcher's blog posts were shared by non-academic organisations including engagement software company Commonplace (see: https://mobile.twitter.com/cmnplace/status/1314885132642332673) and automated transcription software company Otter.ai (https://twitter.com/otter_ai). Twitter was also an effective way of sharing infographics and other outputs from the research (e.g., see https://twitter.com/CaitlinHafferty/status/1347467306839003136) as well as sharing literature and finding out about new research (this Tweet was shared widely and created a valuable thread of resources on digital methods for qualitative research: https://twitter.com/CaitlinHafferty/status/1556620822403481604).

- Evidence was shared with a public engagement software company, Commonplace (https://www.commonplace.is/), during a staff 'lunch and learn' session. The topics shared were further disseminated via a blog post and infographics (see below). Feedback was received that the findings shared on 'best practice' hybrid (blended online and offline) engagement was of particular interest to the organisation and that they will consider the findings and try to incorporate them into future communications and product development.

Reports

Publishing reports during the PhD research is a great way to disseminate research findings in a free, relevant, and accessible way to non-academic audiences. Many of these reports were published as part of research internships with non-academic organisations that were conducted during the PhD (including one through UKRI's Policy Internships Scheme, and another contracted by Natural England), which helped to develop skills writing for and engaging with non-academic audiences. For example, the literature review of this thesis was partly published as an evidence review (a summary of this evidence review was published as an infographic resource pack, and the findings were further disseminated through talks and webinars).

- Hafferty, C. (2022) Embedding an evidence-led, best practice culture of engagement: learning from the evidence. *Natural England Research Report NEER021*. Online at: http://nepubprod.appspot.com/publication/5365328451469312.
    - Supplementary infographic pack: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/11434/.
- Chivers, C., Hafferty, C., Reed, M., Raseta, S. (2022). Exploring the socio-economic innovation capacities of rural food, farming, and forestry small-medium enterprises. NICRE Research Report No.1: July. Online at: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/11449/1/11449_Chivers_Hafferty_Reed_Raseta_%282022%29_Exploring_the_socioeconomic_dynamics_and_innovation_capacities_of_rural_food_and_farming_microbusinesses.pdf.
    - Infographics: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/11449/.
- Chiswell, H., Hafferty, C., Kubinakova, K., and Goodenough, A. (2022). Evidence-led, best practice engagement in Natural England, Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucestershire (internal report).
- Kindred, D., Ingram, J., Hafferty, C., et al. (2021). Farm Performance Enhancement Platform: Appraisal of the impacts of COVID-19 on Knowledge Exchange in Agriculture: Summary. UKRI. Online at: https://www.yen.adas.co.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/FARM%20PEP%20final.pdf.
- Hafferty, C. (2020) What factors are linked to people feeling able to influence decisions affecting their local area? Technical Report. Welsh Government, Cardiff. Online at: http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/8378/.
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- Hafferty, C. (2020) What factors are linked to people speaking the Welsh language? Technical Report. Welsh Government, Cardiff. Online at: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/8382/.
- Hafferty, C. (2020) What factors are linked to people living in households that are in material deprivation? Technical Report. Welsh Government, Cardiff. Online at: http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/8379/.

Blog posts

Blog posts were written for several non-academic organisations and also shared on the researcher's personal blog/website. Writing blogs often led to other engagement and dissemination opportunities, for example, being invited to give a talk on a particular topic.

Guest posts:

- Hafferty, C., Montuori, B., Börner, S., Meziant, K., Dunwoodie-Stirton, F., Wingfield, T. (2021). Participation for sustainable, resilient, and equitable futures: Where are we heading? Participatory Geographies Research Group (PYGYRG) of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).
- Hafferty, C. (2020) 'Public and stakeholder engagement, Covid-19, and the 'digital explosion': are we heading towards a more 'blended' appproach?' [Guest blog] Grasshopper Communications UK. 27th July.
- Hafferty, C. (2020) 'Blending online and offline community engagement' [Guest blog] Commonplace. 6th October.
- Hafferty, C. (2019). (ed.). Postgraduate experiences of convening a session at the RGS-IBG Annual International Conference. Royal Society with IBG Postgraduate Forum. 12th December.
- Hafferty, C. (2019) Engaging communities in the sustainable management of river environments. Salmo Trutta. pp. 74-77.

Personal blog posts:

- All blogs can be viewed here: https://caitlinhafferty.blogspot.com/. This included blog posts sharing insights about the methods used in this thesis (e.g., online methods for qualitative research, automated transcription, productivity tools), adapting PhD research during a pandemic, and blog posts to share reflections on conferences and other events that the researcher attended.
  - The most widely viewed and shared blog posts were on automated transcription for qualitative research. For example, this post on the

background to using automated transcription (https://caitlinhafferty.blogspot.com/2020/08/introduction-to-automated-transcription-software-part1.html), this post on a tutorial for using Otter.ai (https://caitlinhafferty.blogspot.com/2020/08/introduction-to-automated-transcription-software-part2.html), and this post on the ethical and privacy considerations of using automated transcription for qualitative research (https://caitlinhafferty.blogspot.com/2020/10/ethics-of-auto-transcription.html).

- This blog was a powerful tool to share insights with both non-academic and academic audiences and encouraged reflexivity throughout the PhD process. Sharing blog posts on Twitter and other social media platforms (e.g., LinkedIn) was effective and enabled the researcher's blogs to be viewed over 19,000 times over the course of the PhD.

Invited talks and conference presentations

Giving talks to a range of non-academic and academic audiences was beneficial for connecting with interest groups, potential users, and beneficiaries of the research, as well as groups and individuals who could enable the research to achieve impact in the long-term. This included webinars, podcasts, and recorded presentations. Where possible, outputs (e.g., slides and recordings) were shared on the researcher's website and Twitter.

- Issues with no bounds – the role of public engagement in shaping green agenda choices, attitudes, and behaviours. *The Consultation Institute (tCI) Connect*, London, 6th October 2022.
  - Slides: https://www.consultationinstitute.org/connect2022/speaker-slides/.
- Public participation and digital innovation: responsibility, inclusivity, and precaution in environmental decision-making. *RGS-IBG Annual International Conference*. Newcastle, 30th August – Friday 2nd September 2022.
- Web-based geospatial tools for stakeholder participation: challenges and opportunities for planning and environmental governance. *6th International Conference on Urban E-Planning,* Lisbon, 7-12th April 2022 (online).
  - Slides can be accessed here.
- Institutionalising stakeholder participation. *CCRI Winter School*, University of Gloucestershire, 3rd and 4th March 2022.
- Automated transcription for qualitative research. *University of Gloucestershire,* 24th June 2021 (online).
  - YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRsH61aCG_U&t=266s.
  - Slides: https://www.slideshare.net/CCRI/automated-transcription-for-qualitative-research.
- Digital tools for participation. *Contemporary Issues in Participatory Geography: Challenges, Opportunities, and Future Directions*. RGS-IBG Participatory Geographies Research Group (online), 12th-13th May 2021.
  - Blog post: https://pygyrg.org/participation-for-sustainable-futures.
- Geo-information tools for stakeholder engagement in environmental decision-making: best practice recommendations from a UK case study. *29th Annual GIS Research*

UK Conference, Cardiff, 14th-16th April 2021. Online at: https://zenodo.org/record/4665809.

- The practical and ethical issues of digital engagement, School of Natural and Social Sciences PGR Seminar Series, University of Gloucestershire (2021).
- What is best practice engagement? *Natural England internal seminar,* 2021.
- Engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The UK Consult Podcast,* 8th October 2020.
    - Spotify: https://open.spotify.com/episode/5bhsDwf8N3Xei715hTtlnT.
- Virtual data collection during COVID-19. *Liquid Lab, Loughborough University,* November 2020.
- Digital tools for stakeholder engagement. *Commonplace 'lunch and learn' internal session*, October 2020.
- Using technology for engaging people in environmental decisions. *People and Nature in a Pandemic*, Surrey University and Natural England, 2020.
- QUALMAP: Qualitative Geospatial Methods for Active Participation. *14th Conference on Spatial Information Theory,* Regensburg, Germany, 9th-13th September 2019.
- Public Participation in Environmental Decision-making: A mixed-methods mapping approach. *RGS-IBG Annual International Conference 2019*, London, UK.
- Mixed-methods GIS: Developing qualitative geospatial technologies for participatory environmental decision-making. *RGS-IBG Annual International Conference 201*9, London, UK.
- Engaging the public with landscapes and greenspaces: a qualitative geospatial mapping approach. *RGS-IBG Postgraduate Forum Midterm Conference 2019*, Manchester, UK. 2019.
- The future of stakeholder engagement: the use of digital geospatial technologies for active participation in environmental decision-making. *British Environmental Psychological Society Conference 2019*, Cardiff, Wales, UK.

Conference sessions, panels, and workshops

Co-organising conferences and/or conference sessions can be a valuable way to connect with academic and non-academic communities, share research, and keep up to date with contemporary issues in policy, and practice.

- Participatory methods for recovery and transformation. *RGS-IBG Annual International Conference*. Newcastle, 30th August – Friday 2nd September 2022 (session convener).
- Navigating conferences and networking. *RGS-IBG Postgraduate Midterm Conference*, 27-28th April 2022 (panellist).
- Contemporary Issues in Participatory Geography: Challenges, Opportunities, and New Directions. *Online conference: RGS-IBG Participatory Geographies Research Group,* 12th-13th May 2021 (co-organiser).
    - Event recordings: https://pygyrg.org/contemporary-issues-in-participatory-geography-event-recordings.

- Digital technologies and civic engagement: roundtable discussion. *UK Ireland Planning Research Conference*, Newcastle, 8th-10th September 2021 (panellist).
- Session 2: Sustainability. *29th Annual GIS Research UK Conference,* Cardiff, 14th-16th April 2021 (session chair).
- #GeogComm: Engaging with your audience. RGS-IBG Midterm Conference, 19th-23rd April 2021 (panellist).
- Digital public and stakeholder engagement: what works, what doesn't work, and future innovation. *RGS-IBG Digital Geographies Research Group Virtual Symposium*, 1st July 2020 (online).
- Meaningful digital engagement and adapting research. *University of Gloucestershire internal PGR seminar*, 2020.
- Digital participation during COVID-19 seminar. *RGS-IBG Participatory Geographies Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)*, 2020.
- Doing participatory research online/remotely (online workshop), *Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Participatory Geographies Research Group*, 2020.
- New and emerging rural research. RGS-IBG Annual International Conference 2019, London, UK (session convenor).
- Annual Conference Training Symposium (ACTS). RGS-IBG Annual International Conference 2019, London, UK (workshop convenor, chair).

Additional activities

Being part of interdisciplinary and engaged academic research groups helped the researcher to gain confidence in their field, feel part of a wider community, and connect with a range of non-academic audiences.

- Early Career Officer, RGS-IBG Participatory Geographies Research Group (2022-present).
- Postgraduate Representative and Digital Officer, RGS-IBG Participatory Geographies Research Group (2019-22).
- Ordinary Member, RGS-IBG Digital Geographies Research Group (2022-present).
- Chair (member of the Council, Board of Trustees): RGS-IBG Postgraduate Forum (2019-20).
- Annual Conference Officer, RGS-IBG Postgraduate Forum (2018-19).

Appendix B: Survey questions

This appendix contains a copy of the survey questionnaire that was launched using Jisc Online Surveys. This includes information about informed consent (see also Appendix C).

CCRI COUNTRYSIDE AND COMMUNITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

Digital stakeholder engagement study

Page 1: Introduction

Thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to complete this short survey. This survey should take approximately **5 minutes** to complete.

Anyone who has **experience and/or knowledge of public and stakeholder engagement** is warmly invited to participate - we are keen to hear from as many different people as possible!

The information you have provided is very much appreciated and valued. Your responses will directly contribute to our research which **investigates how digital methods are transforming stakeholder engagement during lockdown and beyond**. This will help contribute to understandings of how different participatory technologies are being used and adapted by different people, groups, and organisations. By understanding how we can use technology to engage with people in the most effective, fair, and inclusive ways possible, we can help inform digital engagement strategies now and in the future.

You can view full details about the project here. If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions please don't hesitate to contact the project investigator, **Caitlin Hafferty (caitlinhafferty@connect.glos.ac.uk)**.

Privacy notice and informed consent

Please read the text below carefully. By proceeding with this survey, you are indicating that you agree to the following statements:

1. I confirm that I have been provided with, read, and understand the electronic project **information sheet** for this study (provided via email or **Google Docs link**). I have received enough information about this study, had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and if relevant have had these questions answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is **voluntary** and that I am free to withdraw at any time (within 30 days from the date of my participation), without giving any reason, and without consequence.

3. The Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI), as part of the University of Gloucestershire, is fully **GDPR compliant**. For further information please visit: https://www.glos.ac.uk/governance/information/pages/data-protection.aspx

4. I agree that my **anonymised** data (survey responses) collected as part of this study may be archived at the end of the project in a public data repository and used for future research projects.

5. I agree to take part in this study.

NB. *At the end of this survey, you will be asked if you would like to participate in a follow-up interview as part of this research project. This is entirely voluntary, you can opt out at any time, and any contact details you choose to provide will be kept strictly confidential and stored seperately from your survey responses. If you agree to participate in a follow-up interview, more information will be provided to you by the researcher.*

Page 2: About you

1. What is your gender? ✱ *Required*

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to say

1.a. Which bracket contains your age? ✱ *Required*

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65-74
- ☐ 75+
- ☐ Prefer not to say

1.b. What is your highest level of qualification? ✱ *Required*

- ☐ Below GCSE
- ☐ GCSE or equivalent
- ☐ A-Level or equivalent
- ☐ BA/BSc degree or equivalent
- ☐ MA/MSc degree or equivalent
- ☐ Doctoral degree or equivalent
- ☐ Other

1.b.i. If you selected Other, please specify:

2. In which region of the UK do you live? ✱ *Required*

Page 3: About your work

3. Under usual circumstances (**i.e. before the coronavirus pandemic**), in which region of the UK do you spend the most time working? ✱ *Required*

3.a. What is the name of the organisation where you are currently employed? *Leave blank if you would prefer not to say.*

Your answer should be no more than 50 characters long.

3.b. What is your job title? *Leave blank if you would prefer not to say.* *Optional*

3.c. In which specialist area do you currently work? *You can select up to three main areas from the list below, or enter your own response.* ✱ *Required*

Please select between 1 and 3 answers.

- ☐ Conservation
- ☐ Environmental Consultancy
- ☐ Consultancy (other)
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Public engagement
- ☐ Energy
- ☐ Pressure groups/activism
- ☐ Sustainability
- ☐ Land and agriculture
- ☐ Urban planning/development
- ☐ Waste management

- [ ] Water management
- [ ] Not-for-profit/charity
- [ ] UK Government department
- [ ] Public body/agency
- [ ] Research
- [ ] Other

3.c.i. If you selected Other, please specify:

Page 4: Impacts of coronavirus (COVID-19) on your work

Public and stakeholder engagement in decision-making

4. In general **(i.e. before the coronavirus pandemic)**, how important is the following in your work? ✱ *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 3 answer(s).

	Very important	Moderately important	Not at all important	Don't know
Public and stakeholder engagement in decision-making processes	☐	☐	☐	☐
Using face-to-face methods to engage with public and stakeholder groups (e.g. meetings and consultation events)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Using online, remote methods to engage with public and stakeholder groups (e.g. see the list in question 4a)	☐	☐	☐	☐

4.a. In general **(i.e. before the coronavirus pandemic),** which of the following digital methods are typically used to engage with public and stakeholder groups in your work? *Please select as many digital tools as relevant.* ✱ *Required*

Please select between 1 and 16 answers.

☐ Online consultation platforms (e.g. Commonplace, Participatr)

☐ Webinars

☐ Blog posts

☐ Online surveys

☐ Online mapping (e.g. consultation maps, interactive, participatory and/or community mapping)

☐ Geospatial and GIS (Geographic Information Systems)-based tools and approaches

- Online polling platforms (e.g. Slido)
- Communication and collaboration platforms (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams)
- Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram)
- Video sharing (e.g. YouTube)
- Smartphone apps
- Press release
- Website
- Online newsletters
- Emails
- Other
- None of the above

4.a.i. If you selected Other, please specify:

5. In your experience, how have engagement activities carried out in your work/organisation been affected by restrictions and social distancing measures during the coronavirus pandemic? *Please select any relevant changes.* ✱ *Required*

Please select between 1 and 4 answers.

- Cancellation of engagement events and activities
- Postponement of engagement events and activities
- Moving engagement events and activities online
- Other
- None of the above (engagement activity has not been affected)
- I don't know

5.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

6. **During lockdown**, which of the following digital methods have been used to engage with public and stakeholder groups in your work (i.e. to help overcome restrictions and social distancing measures)? *Please select as many digital tools as relevant.* ✱ *Required*

Please select between 1 and 16 answers.

- ☐ Online consultation platforms (e.g. Commonplace, Participatr)
- ☐ Webinars
- ☐ Blog posts
- ☐ Online surveys
- ☐ Online mapping (e.g. consultation maps, interactive, participatory and/or community mapping)
- ☐ Geospatial and GIS (Geographic Information Systems)-based tools and approaches
- ☐ Online polling platforms (e.g. Slido)
- ☐ Communication and collaboration platforms (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams)
- ☐ Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram)
- ☐ Video sharing (e.g. YouTube)
- ☐ Smartphone apps
- ☐ Press release
- ☐ Website
- ☐ Online newsletters
- ☐ Emails
- ☐ Other
- ☐ None of the above

6.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

7. Are there any important topics or questions you feel that this research project could investigate? *Please use this box if you would like to make any additional comments, suggestions, and so forth.*

Page 5: Participation in follow-up interview

To find out more information about people's experiences of using digital tools to engage with communities and stakeholder groups, this project aims to carry out a series of informal **interviews**. It is important to help keep the conversation going during lockdown and beyond, to inform digital engagement strategies for the future!

We would be very grateful if you could participate in a follow-up interview for this research project. These interviews will be carried out by telephone or online, can take place at a time convenient for you, and should last no longer than 45 minutes. If you would be willing to participate in an interview, **please enter your name and preferred contact details below** and the project investigator (Caitlin Hafferty) will be in touch with more information. If you would not like to be interviewed, then please leave this box blank.

Please note that your name and contact details will be kept strictly confidential (and stored seperately to your survey responses), will be used only by Caitlin Hafferty for the purpose of this research, and will not be shared with any third parties. **You may also opt-out of participating in an interview at any time.**

Many thanks for your consideration - your participation in this research is very important and contributes to understandings of how we can use technology to engage with people in the most effective, fair, and inclusive ways possible.

Please don't hestitate to get in contact with any questions or comments, at caitlinhafferty@connect.glos.ac.uk.

8. **Contact details for follow-up interview:**

Page 6: End of survey - many thanks for your participation

Thank you!

Thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to complete this short survey.

The information you have provided is very much appreciated and valued. Your responses will directly contribute to our analysis of how digital methods are transforming participatory approaches during lockdown and beyond.

We are happy to keep in touch and update you with the progression, findings, and any outputs of this study if you are interested. If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions, please don't hesitate to contact the lead researcher at: caitlinhafferty@connect.glos.ac.uk. You can also keep up-to-date with the project and find me on Twitter @CaitlinHafferty.

Key for selection options

2 - In which region of the UK do you live?

South East
London
North West
East of England
West Midlands
South West
Yorkshire and the Humber
East Midlands
North East
Scotland
Northern Ireland
Wales
Other (outside UK)
Don't know/prefer not to say

3 - Under usual circumstances (i.e. before the coronavirus pandemic), in which region of the UK do you spend the most time working?

North East
North West
Yorkshire and the Humber
West Midlands
East Midlands

South West
South East
East of England
London
Scotland
Northern Ireland
Wales
Other (outside UK)
Don't know/prefer not to say

Appendix C: Example of informed consent for interviews

Countryside & Community Research Institute
University of Gloucestershire
Francis Close Hall
Swindon Road
Cheltenham
GL50 4AZ

Information Sheet for Participants

Title of project: Investigating the use of digital (geospatial) technologies to improve public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making.

Project investigator: Caitlin Hafferty
PhD Researcher
Email:
Tel.: [redacted]

Project team:
Dr Robert Berry (primary supervisor), CCRI
Professor Scott Orford, Cardiff University
Chris Short, CCRI
Dr Beth Brockett, Natural England

Information Sheet for Participants

Title of project: Investigating the use of digital technologies to improve public and stakeholder engagement in planning and environmental decision-making.

We'd like to invite you to take part in a research study that is being conducted as part of a PhD project at the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI). The CCRI is the largest specialist rural research centre in the UK (http://www.ccri.ac.uk/). Before you decide whether to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done, and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information and if there is anything that is not clear, or you would like more information, please ask us (there are contact details at the top of this sheet).

This project focuses on capturing the experiences of **various groups and individuals** (e.g. practitioners, policy makers, researchers, consultants, businesses, charities, community groups, and so forth) who have been involved in **facilitating public and stakeholder engagement in decision-making processes** (or other relevant processes such as for information production, research, consultation, or negotiation purposes). This primarily focuses on engagement activity in the environmental sector (**you can view a list of relevant areas of work here**), however participation in other sectors can be considered relevant.

1. Who is invited to participate?

- You are being invited to participate because you have either kindly volunteered or been identified as someone who has been involved with, either directly or indirectly, carrying out (digital) public and stakeholder engagement in your work.
- By involving you in our research, we will be able to gain a better understanding of **how digital tools and approaches are transforming participatory approaches during lockdown and beyond.**
- Please get in touch with the project investigator, Caitlin Hafferty, with any questions regarding who can participate in this research.

2. What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research project is to contribute to the development of methods and tools for improving participation in decision-making processes. In recent months we have witnessed a surge in the use of digital methods for connecting and engaging with communities and stakeholder groups. Face-to-face meetings and consultations are increasingly being carried out online using tools such as surveys, webinars, and consultation platforms. The recent explosion of the use of more remote, digital methods for various purposes and applications has also pushed digital ethics into the spotlight, including the ethics of using locational data (e.g. for mapping and tracking). Important questions are increasingly being asked in the news and social media regarding the use of digital tools and ethics, power and equality, inclusivity, privacy, and the production of knowledge. Using participatory approaches in the broad environmental sector as an example, this project aims to help contribute to understandings of how different technologies are being used and adapted. By understanding how we can use technology to engage with people in the most effective, fair, and inclusive ways possible, we can help keep important conversations going during lockdown and beyond to inform digital engagement strategies for the future.

3. Do I have to take part?

No, taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part, then you may withdraw at any point (within 30 days of your date of participation) if you later change your mind, without giving a reason. If you agree to take part in any interviews, you will be asked to sign a consent form. More information about this is provided below.

4. What will happen if I decide to take part?

- If you agree to take part (i.e. by responding positively to the invite for your participation in this study), you will be provided with a link to a short online survey.
- On completion of this survey, you will be provided with the option to participate in a follow-up interview. If you agree to this (you may opt out at any time), you will be sent more details by the project investigator (Caitlin Hafferty) regarding the interview stage and any further actions you need to take.
- Follow-up interviews can take place either online (via conference call, such as Zoom or Skype) or telephone, depending on your preference. The interview will be recorded using a mobile recording device. This allows us to quickly and accurately record your

responses for further analysis. The length of the interview is likely to be no longer than 45 minutes.

- This interview will resemble a normal conversation, in which the researcher and you will talk about various aspects of your opinions and experiences of conducting stakeholder engagement work using digital techniques.
- At no time will you be obliged to discuss anything you are not comfortable discussing nor to disclose anything that you don't wish to. As such, any information you give us is completely under your control.

5. What will happen to my data?

Data protection regulation requires that we state the legal basis for processing information about you. In the case of our research, this is a **'task in the public interest'**. Caitlin Hafferty at the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) is the data controller and is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

We will be conducting interviews in this study and will use the minimum personally identifiable information possible. We will not keep, or store, identifiable information about you either during the study, or after the study has finished. This excludes any research documents with personal information, such as consent forms, which will be held securely by Caitlin Hafferty during and after the end of the study.

The audio recording will be recorded and transcribed verbatim by professional and confidential audio transcription software (a computer/mobile phone application called Otter.ai – see https://otter.ai/about and https://blog.otter.ai/privacy-policy/ for more information). You will be given the opportunity to opt out of the use of this software, if you choose, before the interview. Your interview transcript will be analysed using a mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) approach, which will enable the researcher to identify the range of perspectives and experiences of different participants in the study. You will not be identifiable from these transcriptions, nor will your name be attached to your interview data.

6. What are the benefits of taking part?

The information you provide will be a vital contribution to important scientific evidence that will help inform the advancement of digital tools for stakeholder engagement, as well as having relevance to initiatives at the national level such as policy decision-making.

The researcher is committed to using open, accessible (free), and transparent methods and approaches for the collection and analysis of data. The researcher is enthusiastic and willing to share any findings of this research with all participants and associated groups or organisations, including a summary at the end of the project which will explain the results succinctly and in layman's terms, as well as explaining the potential benefits of the findings for policy and practice. All anonymised data from this project will be publicly available online in a research repository, alongside full instructions for reproducing the results of the analysis using free and accessible software.

7. Are there any possible risks to taking part?

As the interview and any further stages will constitute a conversation, no undue effects are anticipated. However, the interview will include questions regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your ability to conduct your usual engagement activities. If the participant finds talking about these issues stressful, they are free to withdraw from the interview at any time, without giving any reason and without consequence.

If following the research you wish to complain about any aspect of the way in which you have been approached or treated during the course of this study then you should contact the primary supervisor of this PhD project, Dr Robert Berry (CCRI) via email at .

8. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information that is collected about you during this study will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you will have your name and personal details removed so that you cannot be recognised from it (unless explicitly stated otherwise, e.g. when submitting your details during the online survey for contact regarding a follow-up interview). It is important to note that other members of the PhD research team may have access to data produced during this project in the analysis phase. Any data used in research outputs (such as academic papers, project reports etc.) will be anonymised and individuals will not be identifiable.

9. What will happen to the results of this study?

Along with other data gathered for this PhD project, the results of this research will inform future stages of the project. This will likely include a future phase of interviews, which is outlined in the section below. Findings resulting from this investigation will be published in the researcher's doctoral thesis. In addition, findings from the research will be used to inform scientific papers which will be published in relevant academic journals. The overall project findings will also be summarised for the general public to read, and we may also use aspects of the data to present our findings at seminars and conferences.

All data resulting from the project, such as interview transcripts, will be archived with an appropriate data repository at the end of the project (in accordance with the funding requirements for the project). However, all data will be anonymised prior to archival and no identifying or personal data will be stored. If you do not wish your interview transcript to be included in the archive, you will be able to opt out of this on the participant consent form you will be provided with before the interview.

10. Participation in future research

In the future (i.e. once coronavirus social distancing limitations have been lifted) this project hopes to collect information on if, and how, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to affect future stakeholder engagement practices. Here, remote digital approaches can be used as a benchmark to investigate face-to-face methods to provide more detailed, reliable, information to meet the project's aims. You will be given the opportunity to opt-in to this stage of the project when you receive the 'participant consent form' for the interview stage. If you agree to this, this will involve the researcher contacting you again at a later date (i.e. later this year in 2020, or next year in 2021) to request a further interview with you.

11. Who is organising and funding the research?

This project is fully funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which is part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). UKRI is a non-departmental public body funded by the UK government. ESRC provides funding and support for research and training in the social sciences. It is the UK's largest organisation for funding research on economic and social issues. For more information, see: https://esrc.ukri.org/.

12. Who has reviewed this study for ethical clearance?

This study has been reviewed and granted clearance by the University of Gloucestershire's Natural and Social Sciences Ethics Panel. If you wish to discuss any ethical issues relating to this project, please contact the Chair of the University's Research Ethics Committee, Dr Emily Ryall at eryall@glos.ac.uk.

13. What if I want to contact the researcher to ask about this study or my participation in it?

You should contact the researcher, Caitlin Hafferty, directly by email at caitlinhafferty@connect.glos.ac.uk or by telephone at [redacted for publication in thesis].

Countryside & Community Research Institute
University of Gloucestershire
Francis Close Hall
Swindon Road
Cheltenham
GL50 4AZ
Tel: +44 (0)1242 715377

Electronic Informed Consent Form

Title of project: Investigating the use of digital technologies to improve public and stakeholder engagement in planning and decision-making.

Interviewer: Caitlin Hafferty, PhD Researcher).

Please read each statement below. If you agree, please initial each box.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet (provided by email on xx.xx.xx) for this study. I have received enough information about this study, had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and (if relevant) have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time (within 30 days of the interview), without giving any reason, and without consequence.	
3. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.	
4. I agree to the interview being recorded and transcribed using a third-party speech-to-text transcription application (Otter.ai – for more information see https://otter.ai/). **Please note, all responses transcribed in third party applications will be kept secure, confidential, and anonymous.** *If you do not agree to this, please leave this box blank and the interview will be transcribed manually by the researcher (i.e.* ***not*** *using third-party software).*	
5. I agree that my anonymised data (interview transcript) collected as part of this study may be archived at the end of the project in a public data repository and used for future research projects.	
6. I agree to take part in the above study.	
7. At a later stage, this project aims to collect information on if, and how, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected **future** stakeholder engagement practices beyond the pandemic. Please initial this box if you agree to being invited to take part in a potential second interview at a later date *(you may opt-out at any time. Leave blank if you do not wish to participate).*	

Name of participant:	*Date:*	*Signature:*
Name of person taking consent: Caitlin Hafferty	*15/06/2020*	*Signature:*

Two copies of consent form are required, one to be retained by interviewee and one by interviewer.

Appendix D. Example of interview question guide

The below questions and prompts were used as a guide to help structure the interviews while creating space for an open and flexible conversation.

Usual engagement activities pre-COVID lockdown (before March 2020): - Type of engagement - e.g., consultation, collaboration, co-design. - Purpose of engaging. - Engagement participants (e.g., public and stakeholder groups). - Methods and approaches used before the pandemic. - Case study examples to illustrate pre-pandemic engagement activity.
The impact of COVID-19 on pre-pandemic engagement activities: - On stakeholder engagement activities (e.g., changes to pre-pandemic ways of engaging, any new methods/approaches used). - Links with wider impacts on work and/or the participant's organisation in general (e.g., furloughed staff, change of organisational priorities).
Challenges and opportunities for digital (remote) tools for engagement: - Focus on case study examples of digital tools for engagement during the pandemic in comparison to in-person engagement. - Factors to consider in comparison to in-person techniques: (i) access and inclusion – digital inclusions and exclusions; (ii) skills and resources; (iii) technical issues such access to the internet and devices; (iv) privacy and security issues; (v) participant experience and feedback about digital engagement; (vi) quality of knowledge and interaction; (vii) hybrid engagement and future best practices; (viii) anything else? - With regards to the above factors: What went well? What did not go well?
Future directions for effective engagement: - Ways to overcome the challenges for digital engagement and strategies to mitigate risks in the future. - Lessons learned about the most effective strategy for engagement. - The continued role and importance of in-person methods in relation to digital engagement. - The potential for more hybrid (blended in-person and digital/remote) engagement – what might this look like? What are the pros and cons?
Closing questions: - Is there anything else that you'd like to add? E.g., anything that I have missed that I could include in the research. - What would be a useful, accessible, and/or relevant output from this research for you and/or your organisation? E.g., the most effective ways to disseminate the research.

Additional prompts to capture institutional barriers more explicitly:

- Background information – type of engagement, purpose/rationale/aims, participants, methods used, case study examples.
- Views and experiences of conducting engagement in [name] institution.
- What engagement means for you and/or the projects you are involved in.
- Challenges and opportunities for carrying out effective public engagement within your institution, e.g. with regards to capacity and capability to engage.
- Lessons learnt and future directions – what needs to happen to further embed a culture of engagement in [name] organisation? E.g., with regards to available resources, support, guidance, and so forth.
- Anything else?

Appendix E: Coding framework used for analysis.

This appendix includes the initial (deductive) set of nodes and child nodes (i.e., themes and sub-themes) that were created based on the overarching research questions, survey results, and literature review. Following this, the final coding framework is outlined which included additional nodes that were developed through an inductive approach (i.e., the process started with a set of nodes but then inductively added new nodes and iterated on them as the data was analysed). In the two tables below, the nodes (main themes) are numbered, and the child nodes (sub themes) are indented.

Initial coding framework
Name
[1] Background information and usual engagement activities
Information about stakeholder engagement in role
Rationale and aims for stakeholder engagement
Type of engagement
Methods used (before the pandemic)
Engagement participants
[2] Impact of Covid-19 pandemic
On day-to-day work and/or organisation
On stakeholder engagement
Perceived challenges and opportunities
[3] Use of digital tools
Tools and technologies used for engagement (before/during the pandemic)
Examples of use in current/past work
[4] Challenges and opportunities for digital tools for engagement
Skills and training
Costs and resources
Privacy and security
Inclusion and representativeness (and 'harder to reach')
Participant experiences
Quality of knowledge and interaction
Perceived value compared to in-person techniques

Hybrid engagement
[5] Future innovation and best practice
Overcoming barriers
Opportunities for the future
Hybrid/blended engagement
[6] Additional themes and comments
Other challenges, opportunities, or future considerations
Perceptions of useful outputs from the research

Final coding framework
Name
[1] Background information and usual engagement activities
[a] Information about stakeholder engagement in role
Topic/issue
Institutional context
[b] Rationale and aims for stakeholder engagement
[c] Type of engagement
[d] Methods used (before the pandemic)
[e] Engagement participants
[f] Background to digital engagement
Tools and methods used
Rationale/purpose/aims
Participants
Examples and good practices
[2] Impact of Covid-19 pandemic
[a] On day-to-day work and/or organisation
Staff and funding costs
Changing institutional priorities
[b] On stakeholder engagement
Perceived appropriateness of engaging during COVID-19 – risks
Challenges and opportunities for digital tools
[3] Challenges and opportunities for digital tools for engagement

[a] Technical issues
Connectivity and bandwidth
Access to equipment / spaces to engage
Available resources
[b] Innovation and creativity during the pandemic
Explosion of creativity and innovation
Benefit of multimodal and multimedia technologies
Drawbacks – gimmicks over practicality, complexity
[c] Access and inclusion
Digital inclusions
Digital exclusions
Lack of data to evidence inclusion/exclusions
[d] Digital literacy
New digital skills developed
Exclusions based on lack of digital skills
Opportunities for training and piloting tools
Skills linked to confidence in engaging
[e] Power relations
Digital technology as a 'leveller'
More difficult to manage power imbalances online
Unequal power relations are inherent
Reinforced importance of skilled facilitation
[f] Social interaction
Impacts on in-depth discussion (balance of qual and quant data)
Lack of informal / spontaneous discussion
Lack of non-verbal communication
Restricting contextual data (lack of in-person and in-situ)
Restricting collaborative and/or co-produced engagement
[g] Trust and transparency
Difficult to build and maintain relationships online
In-person important for credibility
Digital tools increasing transparency and credibility
[h] Privacy and security

Participant anonymity
Bias and misrepresentation
Ownership / storage / control
Impacts on well-being and mental health
[i] Participant experience and feedback
Informal and/or anecdotal
Need to embed as part of evaluation process
Digital can be useful for collecting feedback
[4] Future innovation and effective practices for digital engagement
[j] Effective engagement strategies
Flexible and adaptable – no one size fits all
Adapted to participant need (feedback/evaluation)
Experimenting with what works
Blend of hybrid, digital (remote), and in-person
Outputs – guidance, case studies, other resources
Learning from challenges and opportunities
Learning from other engagers/institutions/sectors
[5] Institutionalising engagement
[k] Roles and resources
Availability of resources – capacity/capability
Lack of clarity around roles/responsibilities
Improving understandings, goals, guidance, clarity
[l] Skills and confidence
Nervousness and fear
Importance of investing in people and technical skills
Training and support
[m] Managing expectations
Risk of stakeholder opposition and conflict
Risk if engagement does not happen as expected
Importance of being clear of what is on/off the table
[n] Agency
Lack of agency / top-down control
Lack of institutional trust in staff

Institutions controlled by other institutions
Restrictions on communications
[o] Planning and future effective strategy
Importance of clear guidance
Institutional, sector-wide, or national regulations
Engagement needs to be embedded (culture change)

Appendix F: Survey questionnaire open-ended question responses

Responses to the open-ended survey question: *'Are there any important topics or questions that this research project could investigate? Please use this box if you would like to make any additional comments, suggestions, and so forth.'* (See Appendix B).	
Response number	**Response**
1	Overcoming barriers to digital engagement, understanding the needs of different audiences, accessibility, and the appropriateness of difference technologies for capturing both qualitative narratives and quantitative data for landscape & nature conservation.
2	Has the expansion of the online opportunities for engagement brought new audiences? Have there been many "newbies"?
3	Webinars: true number of farmers taking part. Virtual events: true number of farmers taking part.
4	How valuable is face to face engagement? (I.e. Do people feel that their opinions are awarded greater weight in face to face consultations compared to online only)
5	What are the skills needed to use the various methods and tools effectively? Who is offering training and is it effective? What is stakeholder/ public perception {of the} quality of engagement when online tools are used?
6	Digital exclusion. We have put extra effort into leafleting households to get vital information out.
7	I work with disabled people and they don't all have access to the internet
8	From previous job as web designer, I'm really concerned about privacy issues, as in corporate accountability and use of data gathered from using online tools such as Twitch, Zoom & YouTube. I'm not sure if GDPR regulations cover the use of this data?
9	If you have used more digital engagement techniques, how have the community/stakeholder responded to this?
10	If these new techniques are changing the demographic of those who typically engage.
11	Dangers of losing nuance online and not reaching shy voices.
12	How to engage online when stakeholder access to devices varies/is limited.
13	Has lockdown made communication with 'hard to reach' stakeholders (e.g., disengaged or remote farmers) harder (even less opportunities for f2f

	engagement = no engagement) or easier (i.e., online methods now more normal/acceptable actually improved things?).
14	1) Whether there is an optimum "blend" of face to face and online engagement. 2) If online methods increase the ease with which outside organisations/ the general public can engage in decision-making (i.e. not just consultation).
15	How can we ensure inclusion and reaching seldom heard groups during physical distancing - digital engagement is a method but should not be the only form. Trying to get this message across is tricky.
16	Digital inclusion is interesting, we co-designed an engagement method with a group of over 50s who don't have smart phones to help them to access to park facilities.
17	Which communities online engagement has benefited and which has suffered and whether it has helped to reach hard-to-reach groups.
18	Keeping participant's attention when in big group meetings.
19	I'm interested in the quality of the interaction. I've moved some previously planned stakeholder participation online, it's more difficult to gauge its success compared to live.
20	The level to which online platforms build confidence in under-represented or hard to reach groups in participating in community decision making. For example, do BAME people feel more confident to express their views online and anomalously that they would in a 'town hall' workshop setting?
21	1. Quality of the engagement via the various formats in respect of stakeholder organisations and the specific contact in those organisations, including consideration of the socio demographics of the contact. 2. Does digital work better for some types of engagement and for specific cohorts 3. Examples of good practice - UK and International.
22	Deliberative engagement - with more digital are we excluding certain segments of society?