Only Reconnect

A note on Engage Britain's Reconnection Summit,
11 October 2022

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About the Institute for Community Studies

The Institute for Community Studies is a research institute with people at its heart. Powered by the not-for-profit organisation, The Young Foundation, the Institute works to influence change, bridging the gap between communities, evidence, and policymaking.

Institute for Community Studies
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About Engage Britain

Engage Britain is a fully independent charity that gives people a say on what matters most to them.

We believe we can make our country stronger if we take on its problems together and find answers that are grounded in people's real lives.

That's why we bring people together across the country with all their different views, knowledge and experience. To debate and create the plans they want to see.

Then we work with them to make those changes happen. Bringing the public closer to those in power.

And to demonstrate how people's practical, realistic solutions can benefit Britain. So our country works for us all.

Engage Britain

Cover illustration: Ailsa Jean Kay, STAR Project

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Introduction

Engage Britain is a new, independent charity set up to give people in Britain a say in the big decisions that affect their lives, to help make a country that works for everyone. Its aim is to amplify real voices from communities, bringing people with different views, knowledge and experiences from around the country together, and supporting them to debate and create realistic plans for the change they want to see.

One of the ways that Engage Britain has sought to do this is through its Grassroots Advisory Network (GAN), a group of community activists and leaders from across the UK who act as advisors on the work of Engage Britain and identify areas of common concern.

This focus on what matters most to local people is closely aligned with the mission of the Institute for Community Studies, itself an evidence centre that believes the involvement of communities in the research process leads to better decision-making on the issues that most affect them.

The social consultancy TPXimpact, the GAN, Institute for Community Studies, and Engage Britain joined forces on 11 October 2022 to host a national policy co-design Reconnection Summit in Manchester. This report summarises the process and outcome of that day, and seeks to place it in the wider context of hyper-local policy innovation.

How did we get here?

Reconnection Tour Locations. Source: Engage Britain, 2022

The GAN was established by Engage Britain in 2020 and quickly identified disconnection as an emerging theme, both within communities, and between communities and central powers. Physical isolation due to social distancing during the pandemic, as well as emotional disconnection and fraying voluntary services, were identified as contributing to a strongly felt loss of connection and sense that people were not being heard or valued.

A series of co-design workshops between Engage Britain and GAN - facilitated by the Good Faith Partnership - then led to Reconnection Tour . Through a series of events ('tour stops') across the UK, the GAN sought to bear witness to individuals who felt isolated and disconnected, and provide a space to let them feel valued and heard.

The tour also celebrated the resilience of community organisations during the pandemic and promoted new connections between local community members.


Reconnection tour illustration. Source: STAR Project, 2022

The Reconnection Tour was about bearing witness to the stories and voices of the disconnection, as well as to the efforts of local communities to connect and support each other. The tour also sought to encourage policy-makers and wider society to 'bear witness' themselves, and take action in response to the stories.

Through May and June 2022, 14 tour stops were hosted by local community organisations (often also members of the GAN). These stops were accompanied with activities, workshops, and storytelling opportunities for community members, to leave a 'local legacy' of reconnection between people (Engage Britain, 2022).

Following the tour, a series of 'Local Hub' workshops were held that sought to capture feedback from participants. Organisations that had taken part in the tour were sent prompt questions to facilitate a discussion with Engage Britain and the GAN, as well as the opportunity to send information following that discussion in formats such as text, art, video, and audio.
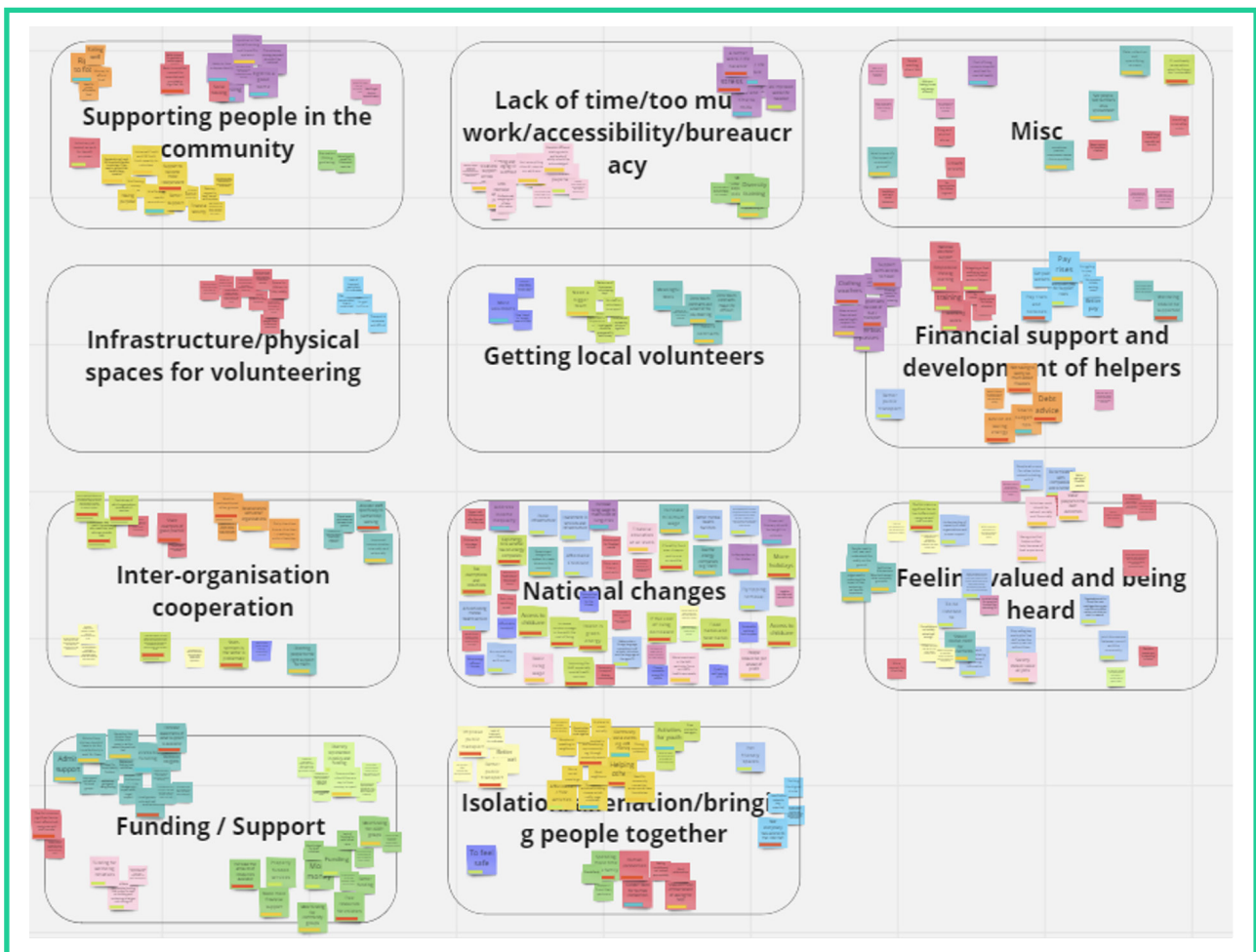
Screenshot of co-analysis session on themes in feedback from the Local Hubs. Source: Engage Britain, 2022
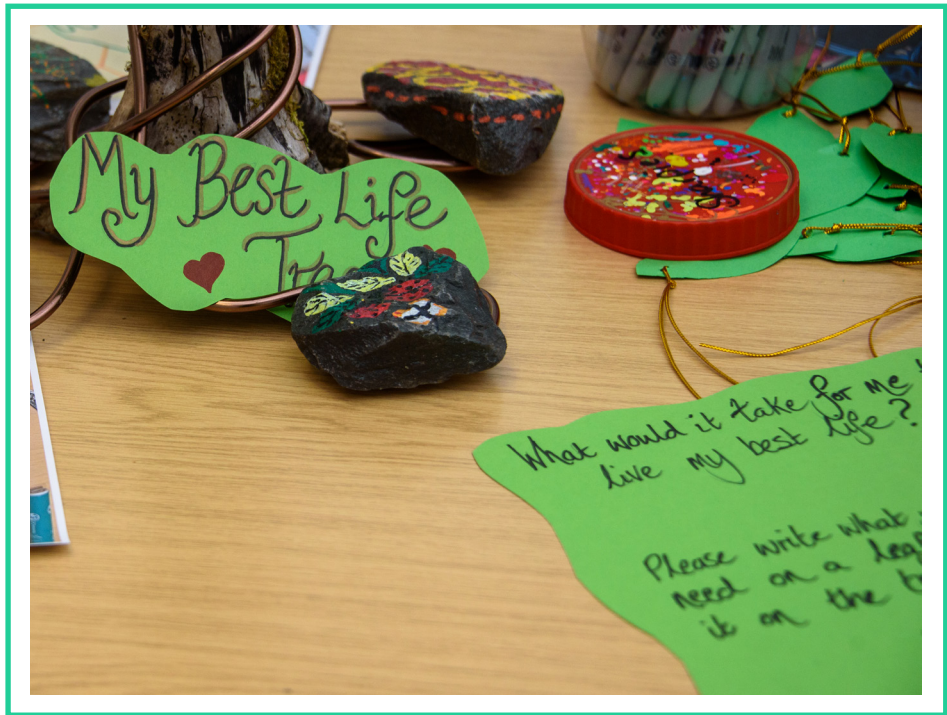
Source: Engage Britain, 2022.

Questions discussed as part of the feedback session were produced by the GAN, and fell under three headings:

- How could/should helpers be helped?
- What are the barriers and opportunities to support hyper-local organising?
- What would it take for you to live a decent life?

The outputs from these discussions were then analysed and themed by Engage Britain to identify major themes and commonly identified issues across organisations.

Through the Local Hubs, Reconnection Tour stops, and the stories shared by local community members, Engage Britain and the GAN were able to identify various challenges facing communities around the UK. The most urgent issue identified was the need to address the cost-of-living crisis. Organisations heavily emphasised the importance of being able to properly support their community through the crisis, and the strain it was placing on already stretched community organisations.

The Reconnection Summit

Taking place on 11 October 2022, the Reconnection Summit was envisaged as the 'national legacy' of the tour as a celebration of its achievements, and a pivot towards next steps for the network. With over 70 attendees, including GAN members, senior civil servants, senior local government officials, academics, community members and community volunteers, the Summit brought into one place a wealth of knowledge, expertise and lived experience. And with just one day to arrive at a set of decisions, Engage Britain, TPXimpact and the Institute for Community Studies sought to facilitate a policy co-design process based around the following steps:

Table discussions

- Participants were allocated to 10 tables (both offline and online) of around seven people with one facilitator. Tables were a mixture of GAN members, Listening Stop tour attendees, and external policymakers and researchers.
- Each table also had a dedicated facilitator from TPXimpact or Engage Britain. After introductory discussions, facilitators guided their tables through three questions:
- What must change to tackle the cost-of-living crisis in our communities?
- What must change so that our community organisations and volunteers survive, and then thrive?
- What must change so that we can build community and shape our local places together?

Ideas for change

- During table discussions, facilitators and participants recorded the emerging 'asks' on a series of pre-prepared cards. These were typically policy proposals, although not all were directed at government (eg, several were directed at voluntary and community groups).
- From the 'asks' recorded during discussions, participants were asked to prioritise two or three proposals within their tables.
- These asks were collated by Engage Britain and grouped by theme in preparation for voting.

Voting

- Participants were invited to vote for specific proposals using dot-voting. Each partiicpant was given 3 dot stickers to place next to options they wished to prioritise.
- Votes were aggregated under each theme across online and offline platforms by Engage Britain after the voting round was completed.
- The three themes with the highest number of votes were then selected as the key asks from the event.

Final reflections

- Participants and government decision-makers were invited to provide final reflections on the key asks and their experiences of the Reconnection Summit, as well as what next steps may be needed.

The continuous and steadily widening process of engagement during the tour helped to paint a richer picture of the conditions facing community organisations across the country. Though the GAN identified poverty as a key theme at the outset of its co-creation work, broader participation situated this theme within the wider context of the cost-of-living crisis – compounding damage done to the resilience VSCE organisations and economically marginalised community members during the pandemic. In the words of a GAN member at the Reconnection Summit, the Local Hubs and Reconnection Tour stops provided the 'meat on the bones' for the eventual direction of the Summit.

Photos of the exhibition space (top) and 'public living room' (bottom). Source: Engage Britain, 2022.

Alongside the co-creation process, the Reconnection Summit ran parallel sessions focused on storytelling as well as exhibition:

- **Storytelling:** Engage Britain staff were on hand to record stories from participants about their communities' or personal experiences of connection/disconnection and community power. These stories will be used to amplify the voices of people with lived experience of the policy failures that enable poverty, and provide examples of hyper-local solutions coming from communities. Several attendees (primarily GAN members) also shared their own stories publicly to all attendees in between stages of the co-creation process.

- **Exhibition spaces:** Separate spaces were maintained within the venue building for participants to show outputs from listening stop tours and community initiatives. A quiet space was also kept open for participants as well as a public living room, set up by members of the Camerados movement[1], for relaxed conversation.

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[1]Camerados is a social movement emphasising human connection and interpersonal support during 'tough times'. Public Living Rooms run on mutual aid to create spaces where people can congregate.

What is policy co-design?

'Co-design' is a practice that seeks to redress the exclusion of those directly affected by a designed innovation (which could be anything from a product, service, or new public policy) from the design process. The 'design process' is a form of problem-solving; the need to 'design' an innovation emerges because of an existing problem, which the innovation will fix or ameliorate (Burkett, 2016). Broadening participation in who sits at the table when solving problems, and a wider recognition of who holds 'expertise' relevant to finding a solution, is at the heart of the co-design movement.

Co-design practices emerged from the private sector innovation literature, and are now increasingly applied to public services (Blomkamp, 2018). In business or social service settings, the groups these co-design processes seek to include are often the 'end-users' of the product or service. For example, an application process for a specific type of welfare support could be co-designed with prospective applicants. When we consider *policy* co-design, a similar principle would lead us to seek to include the people affected or most affected by a policy issue in crafting solutions. Rather than being told what they need by policymakers, co-design could be a vehicle to make visible the voices of communities often marginalised in existing processes to highlight and identify their own needs or solutions (Booth, 2019).

This broader participation is usually presented in stark contrast with the typically privileged position of expert professionals, such as civil servants or external consultants in policy formation (Williams et al., 2020). Under many policy processes, the individuals affected by policy issues are still cast as the 'subject' of any solution – policy is done 'to' or 'for' them. In a co-design approach, professional expertise and scientific evidence remains relevant, but at an equivalent level with local knowledge and lived experience brought by individuals affected by the issue at hand. What takes co-design beyond simple consultation is that those individuals are *active participants* in the design process. Policy is formulated 'with' or 'by' those typically only cast as 'subjects' (Blomkamp, 2018).

Why do co-design?

Arguments for adopting co-design approaches to public policy fall under two branches:

1. **Effectiveness:** co-designed policy is argued to be more effective and impactful than more traditional means of designing public policy that centre civic servants and external professionals (Blomkamp, 2018).

2. **Greater participation:** co-designed policy could be seen as 'more democratic' or enabling 'greater participation' of people in politics and policymaking, both of which can be seen as good in themselves (Burkett, 2016).
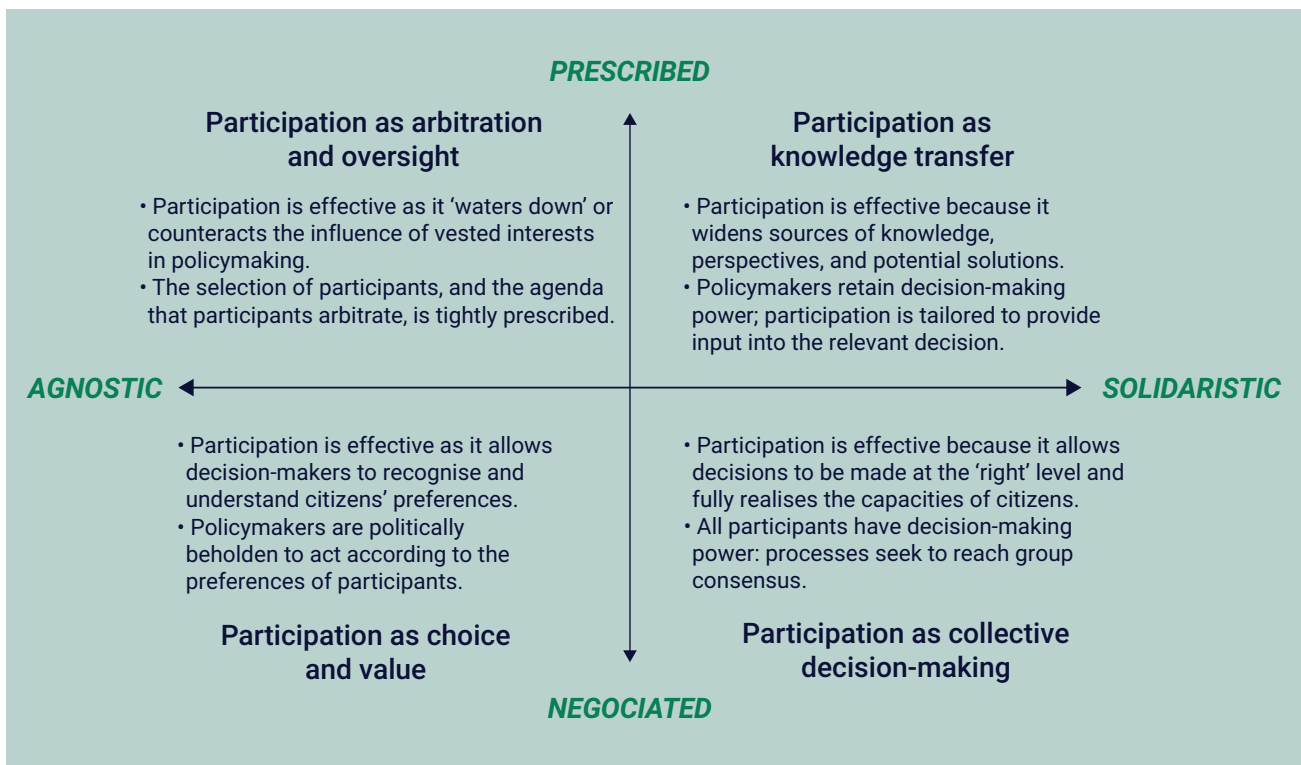
However, the causal link between co-design approaches and better policy outcomes, as well as the meaning of 'participation', differs widely across advocates, based on their underlying political philosophy. Does greater participation require the sharing of power from policymakers to people? Does it produce better results because it facilitates cooperation or competition between stakeholders? Differing answers to these questions could mean that two advocates for co-design approaches in public policy adopt very different practices.

Dean (2016) proposes a typology for participatory practices for policy decisions that reflects the different logics for 'why' participation is effective across two dimensions:

- **Sociality:** is the participatory space somewhere individuals promote and defend their own self-interest (*agonistic*), or co-operate as part of a social collective for the common good (*solidaristic*)?

- **Negotiability:** are the conditions of the participatory space (who participates, about what) imposed on participants (prescribed), or developed as part of the participatory process (*negotiated*)?

Using these two dimensions, Dean identifies four 'modes' of public participation in policy. All these modes are arguably 'participatory', though within the logic of one mode it may be hard to recognise the justification for other 'types' of participation.

PRESCRIBED

Participation as arbitration and oversight
- Participation is effective as it 'waters down' or counteracts the influence of vested interests in policymaking.
- The selection of participants, and the agenda that participants arbitrate, is tightly prescribed.

Participation as knowledge transfer
- Participation is effective because it widens sources of knowledge, perspectives, and potential solutions.
- Policymakers retain decision-making power; participation is tailored to provide input into the relevant decision.

AGNOSTIC — SOLIDARISTIC

- Participation is effective as it allows decision-makers to recognise and understand citizens' preferences.
- Policymakers are politically beholden to act according to the preferences of participants.

- Participation is effective because it allows decisions to be made at the 'right' level and fully realises the capacities of citizens.
- All participants have decision-making power: processes seek to reach group consensus.

Participation as choice and value

Participation as collective decision-making

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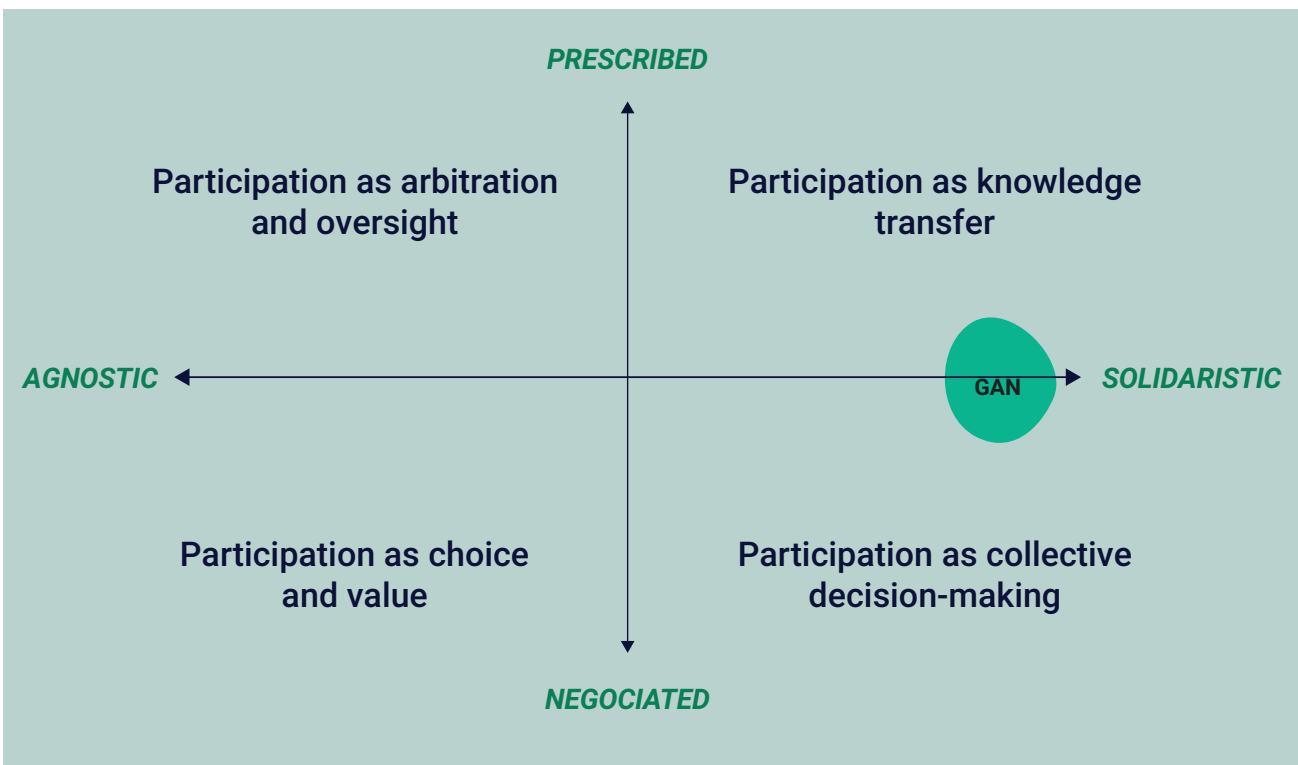Typology of public participation. Source: Adapted from Dean (2016) by authors

The Summit as a co-design process

The GAN, supported by Engage Britain, occupies an interesting territory within this framing, which assumes that participation is structured between policymakers and stakeholders directly. As a non-governmental organisation, Engage Britain faces constraints in situating the Summit either within a form of participation 'prescribed' by decision-makers in public policy, or 'negotiated' with them.

The wider process which arrives at the Reconnection Summit focused on collective decision making, and seeking the input of participants on future direction. For these reasons, steps up to the summit fit the 'participation as collective decision making' participatory space highlighted in Dean (2016). What emerged from the initial co-design was a desire to broaden participation further, with the 'what' of participation (ie, the ultimate goal of the participation process) left open to evolution. The topic for discussion, the choice of participants, and decisions on the key asks during the Summit were therefore iteratively negotiated across all participants.

However, for the participation process to eventually influence public policy, government decision-makers must be involved. Those decision-makers currently retain the power to decide whether to prescribe or negotiate the terms of their involvement. Using the typologies in Dean (2016), we could therefore represent the GAN's mode of participation as undetermined. Next steps in the process, as those with decision-making power on policies affecting the cost-of-living crisis are engaged, will determine what 'mode' of participation the Reconnection Summit sits within, as a stakeholder-policymaker co-creation exercise.

GAN's position in the Typology of public participation. Source: Underlying typology adapted from Dean (2016) by authors

The challenge facing Engage Britain and the GAN reflects it's 'bottom up' process in engaging community members. Co-design processes are often seen as starting with policy decision-makers, who choose to engage their stakeholders differently (see, for example, Gouillart & Hallet, 2015). The role of third-party organisations in this process is, typically, as facilitators between stakeholders and decision-makers. For example, HMPPS Wales and the Ministry of Justice in the Ely and Caerau wards of Cardiff have engaged Telescope, a third-party social enterprise, to facilitate co-creation workshops with community members on new approaches to probation (Telescope, n.d.).

In contrast, Engage Britain faces challenges common to many grassroots movements as they build power and seek to influence policymakers. There is significant literature exploring how patterns of collective action change when dealing with participatory institutions, with many possible outcomes. For example, entering a participatory institution may limit the autonomy of a grassroots movement and subject actions to vetoes from political actors with different priorities (Lima, 2021). In the case of GAN and the Reconnection Summit, the 'participatory space' formed may change as policymakers are engaged. Will the process of co-creating 'asks' be treated as an input from knowledgeable experts for policymakers, or are policymakers joining an ongoing process of collective decision-making? On the day, there were open questions amongst GAN members and participants on what type of engagement with policymakers was expected going forward.

The bottom-up process of the Reconnection Tour and Summit has been a powerful step in generating autonomy on ideas to put forward, but members have less autonomy to bring those ideas on board at a local or national level. The co-design process without policymaker buy-in has created a political platform, not yet the policy itself. Engage Britain and community members can decide whether to treat key asks as a platform of demands, formulated through knowledge-sharing, that policymakers receive as an input; or seek to build ways to draw policymakers into a negotiated participatory space. Yet moving between these 'modes' is made difficult by power dynamics, which make it easier or harder to achieve certain forms of participation, as well as the available time to build a negotiated participatory space. These dynamics are key as Engage Britain and the GAN face a series of important decisions on *when* and *how* to use co-design influence policy.

Key success factors

Alongside the co-design and community-building elements of the Reconnection Summit were other process decisions that shaped the participatory space on the day. These included the effective use of 'stagecraft', the role of facilitators, the lived experience of the community delegates, and the sense of continuous engagement.

Stagecraft

Participants commented on the goodwill and positive energy they felt at the Reconnection Summit, with some contrasting it with a worrying growth in distrust between voluntary organisations in their own communities. During the introductory discussion, for example, one participant expressed a strong feeling of "bleakness" in their community that had been replaced by a sense of hopefulness and power in the participatory space of the Summit.

This sense of energy and purpose was a function of the participants themselves, and also of several choices made by Engage Britain and TPXimpact on how to run the event. The organisers had chosen a cabaret-style layout of circular tables that helped make the space feel full and bustling with conversation. The addition of exhibition spaces and a 'public living room' enabled participants to socialise outside of the main hall. Critically, having a single compère with an energetic style helped to keep the room together between table discussions, and built momentum toward the final tasks.

Photograph of 'cabaret-style' layout and single compere. Source: Engage Britain (@EngageBritain) / Twitter, 2022

The central role of stories and storytelling proved motivating during the day. Interspersed between steps in the co-design process, GAN members and other participants shared stories in front of the room about their experiences of connection and disconnection in their community, as well as the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis. This reflected an objective identified by the GAN in its earlier workshops to bear witness to those feeling isolated and disconnection, and providing a space to feel valued and heard (Grassroot Advisory Network, & Engage Britain, 2021). As community activity had often started in response to a need, many of these stories focused on the activity and history of GAN voluntary, community and social enterprise (VSCE) organisations. At table discussions, the authors noted multiple points where stories were used to emphasise points and articulate need.

These choices on the environment, tone, and emotional landscape of the event undoubtably influenced choices made and levels of participation during the co-design process. Following Dean's typology (2016), the environment may have helped enhance a sense of 'solidaristic' participation in which participants see themselves as engaging collaboratively rather than competitively.

Feedback to TPXimpact described the Summit Event as "powerful and uplifting… It felt like people were coming together for a shared purpose" (TPXimpact, 2022).

Facilitation

The role of the facilitator emerged as a critical part of the co-design process. Each table had its own facilitator, selected either from TPXimpact or Engage Britain, and each had been given a conversation guide and a copy of the agenda. The conversation guide included themes identified for each question at the Tour Stops, and a suggested approach to facilitating conversations at the table (see below). Beyond this, facilitators were allowed considerable discretion, and different facilitators adopted very different styles toward 'managing' table discussions and identifying the final policy 'asks'. Some, for example, relied on notes taken during the session, which were summarised back to the table to move discussion along. In these examples, decisions made by the facilitator on what should or should not be part of the summary would shape the next stage of co-design. Others used post-it notes to create a shared copy of points discussed at the table, which others at the table could add to.
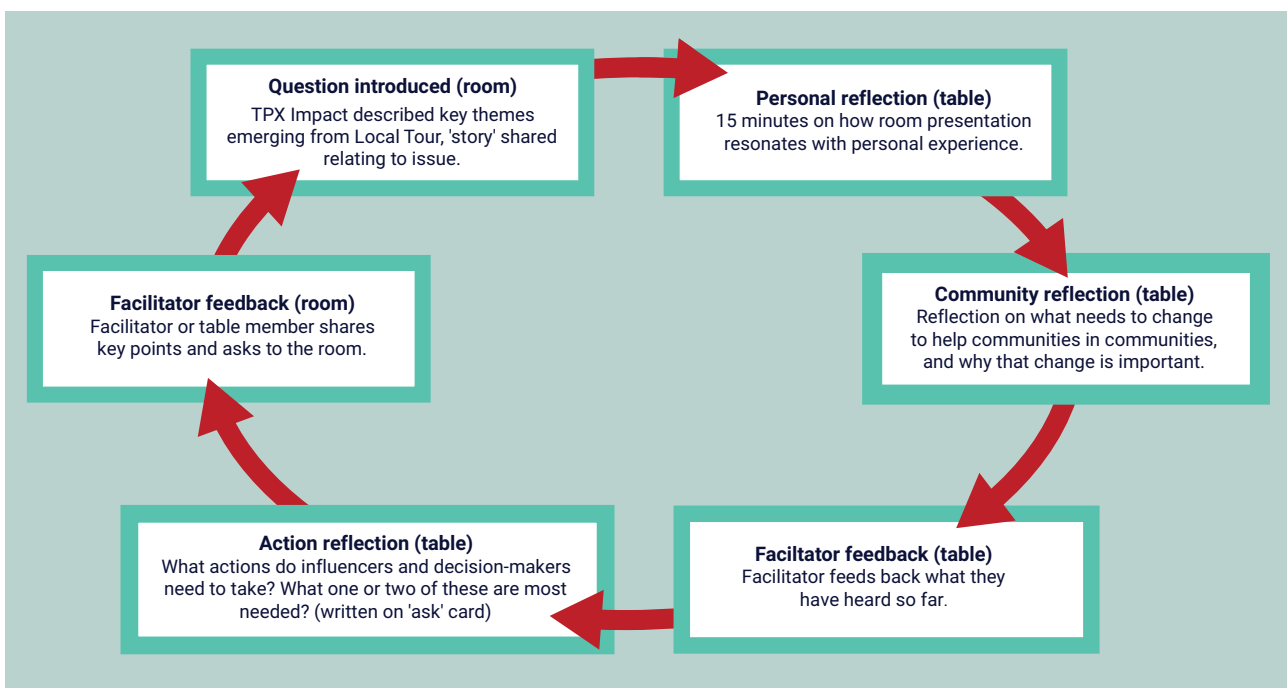
Proposed steps for conversation in facilitator conversation guide. Source: Engage Britain, 2022
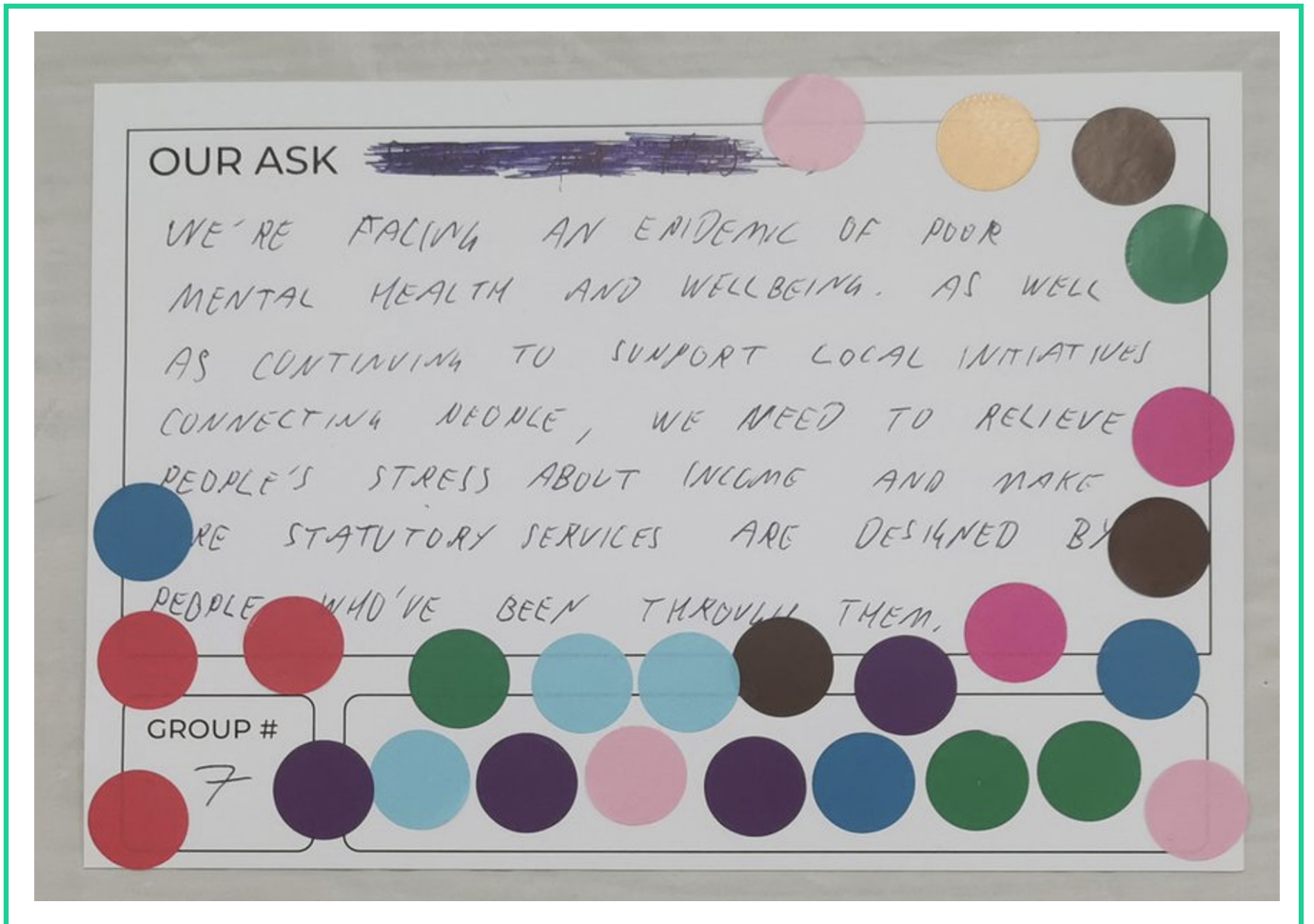
An example of an 'ask' with voting stickers. Source: Engage Britain (@EngageBritain) / Twitter, 2022

Lived experience

"It's vital to involve people who use, work in and are affected by services all the time. Their perspectives are important to understand the bigger picture. Only people who live and breathe it day to day know what it's really like."(McCrae, n.d.)

By framing the importance of lived experience as a source of knowledge and input into the policy process, Engage Britain seeks to empower those it works with and give them the confidence to create new solutions to long-standing policy challenges. In the context of the Summit, this meant encouraging GAN members and other community delegates to recognise and present themselves as experts due to their direct experience of providing support to their communities. However, it also brought a critical perspective on the experiences of those not in the room, such as refugees or recent migrants.

A related concern as table members introduced themselves to each other was the 'missing' voice of local government. In fact, local government officials were present at some tables (as were representatives from central government) and more table mixing between sessions might have led to richer policy co-design conversations.

Continuous engagement

The Reconnection Summit was essentially one more 'tour stop' in a longer process of engaging community and voluntary sector organisations, kicked off by the formation of the GAN. Building a participatory space that is negotiated and solidaristic called for a level of trust between participants. This had been built through continuous engagement, and was supported through the resource provided by Engage Britain.

Policymaking itself is a continuous process. As the identification of the 'problem' in a policy context becomes more precise, and learning is generated from attempting various solutions, policy asks must be adaptable to succeed. In the same way, the process of co-creation is continuous. Engage Britain and the GAN sit in a unique position, away from centres of government power that would typically initiate a policy co-design process. As a result, the process has taken a bottom-up approach in building a participatory space that lends itself well to the continuous engagement needed to build trust and craft effective policy. However, it also risks taking much longer to access the power needed to implement those ideas by influencing policymakers or wider society.
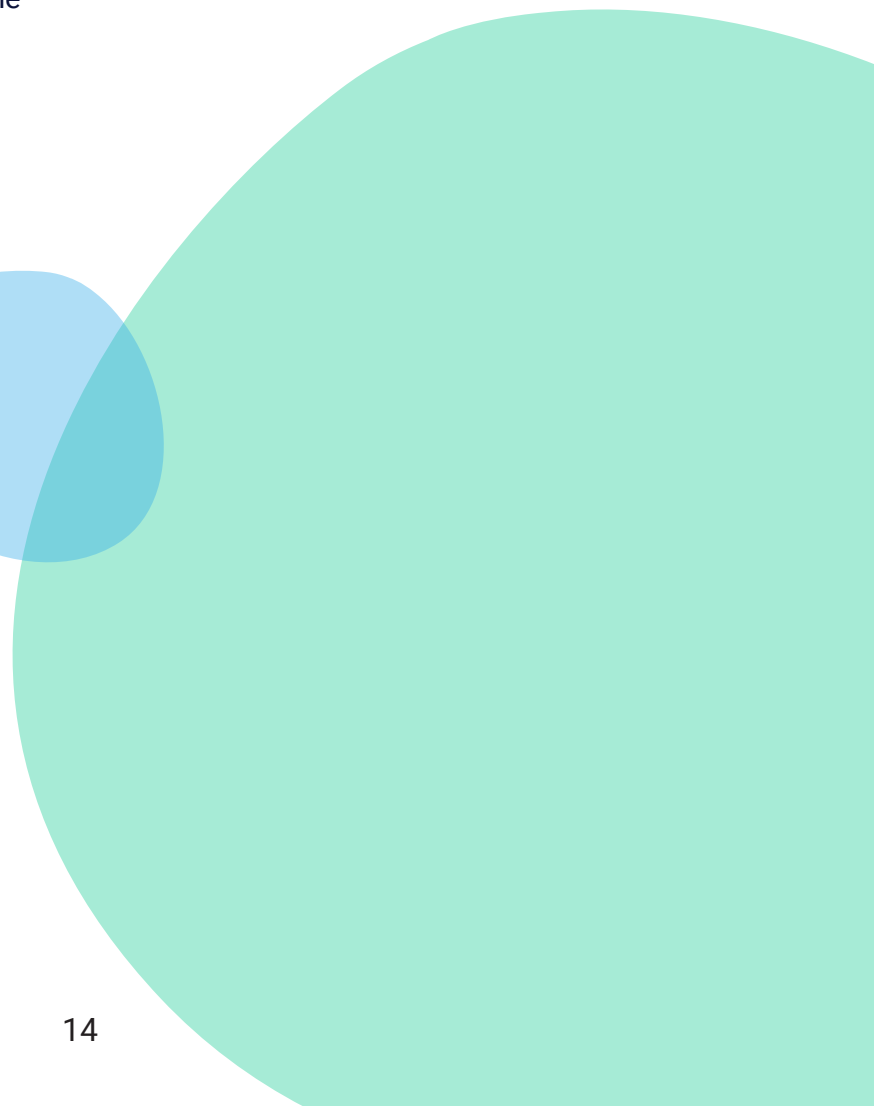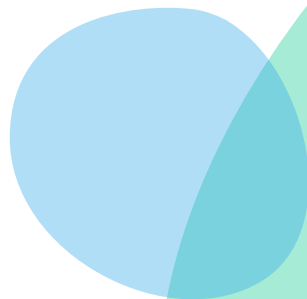
Lessons learned

The Reconnection Tour and Summit represent a bold experiment in building a grassroots participatory space for policy co-design. A bottom-up approach has allowed flexibility for participants to shape the direction of travel for the initiative. However, having formulated their policy asks, the next challenge is how to influence 'real' policymakers who have the power to prescribe their own terms of engagement. Various opportunities to strengthen the rigour of the policy co-design process include the use of common policymaking tools, greater information-sharing, a focus on representation, and alternative ways to achieve consensus.

Common policy tools

The final policy asks were agreed through facilitated discussion and a dot-voting process. However, several participants raised concerns at their tables, and during wider feedback sessions, about the feasibility of some of the proposals, or the strategy to achieve them. Moving from a wider discussion of issues facing the sector to potential solutions also proved difficult in cases where asks were more conceptual and less actionable or specific (eg, re-framing 'hard-to-reach communities' as 'hard-to-reach services', or encouraging decision-makers to spend more time in the community).

A more structured approach to generating a shared definition of the 'problem' and then testing the feasibility or radicality of proposed solutions could have adopted more traditional policymaking tools such as:

- **'red teaming':** this is when a group of people are identified as a 'red team' to explain why the proposal does not work or would not solve the problem. This allows participants to better articulate why an ask would be successful and specify details of the ask (eg, where funding might be raised or reallocated).

- **problem deconstruction:** for problems that are complex and systemic, it can be helpful to 'deconstruct' the problem into smaller underlying issues that are open to local solutions. Methods include 'five why' (after articulating a current poor outcome/issue, asking *why* this happens at least five times to identify root causes), or creating Ishikawa/Fishbone diagrams to visually represent sub-causes and precisely identify the issue to be targeted (Andrews et al., 2018).

- **legislative theatre:** create a play, based on lived experiences, which audience members can participate in as 'spect-actors' to change the direction of the play and try out ideas.

- **policymaker challenge:** most tables had at least one participant who was a policymaker or policy-focused academic. Opportunities may have been missed for those members to provide constructive challenge to the ideas proposed by their tables.

Information sharing

A wealth of stories and lived experiences were shared and celebrated at each of the Reconnection Tour stops. Attendees reported to the authors that this was enormously helpful as a way of building trust and a sense of solidarity amongst participants. However, for Tour participants who were not members of the GAN or Tour Stop hosts, their primary experience was limited to their 'stop'.

Tour stop hosts and the GAN held regular meetings throughout the tour and shared feedback from each stop. Tour stop hosts also had invites to each of the other tours (for example, three STAR Project (a community organisation based in Renfrewshire) team members visited another Scottish tour stop in Alloa.

Capacity constrained some organisations from participating in this exchange of information – and, for non-host participants, less information was distributed. Aside from

the exhibition space at the event, which contained illustrated summary boards of the Tour, the main information shared prior to the Summit was via a link to a website with high-level information on the Tour.

A more structured way of sharing information might have proved useful to both leverage the experiences shared across the whole tour and build a stronger network. Participants who could only attend the Reconnection Summit online, or not at all, or who faced capacity constraints in attending meetings during the Tour, might then have had a chance to ensure their voices were heard across all tables. Information-sharing could also help to build connections outside the Summit on shared issues or best practices that could support all participants.


Illustrated summaries of the Reconnection Tour in the exhibition space. Source: Engage Britain (photo), STAR Project (illustrations), 2022.

Representation

Any community-focused event eventually faces the question 'what is a community?' The focus on community and voluntary organisations through the GAN members implicitly assumes that such organisations are best-placed to represent their communities. This assumption is not unreasonable, given the nature of the work that hyper-local VSCE perform, often engaging with vulnerable community members and across multiple places and spaces within their communities.

However, the position of Summit delegates within VSCE organisations undoubtedly affects the perspectives brought forward by the co-design process. Some of the most popular asks focused on the nature of funding for non-profit and voluntary work, or reframing the importance of volunteering (eg, become a more significant part of employment support services). If the Summit had been populated with participants randomly selected from the full population of communities represented by the delegates, it is an open question whether these proposals would have been as popular, or if a different set of issues would have emerged.

'Perfect' representation is only ever an aspiration in a co-design process, not a reality. More important is recognising where gaps exist, and where the position of delegates may shape their priorities and focus. To build a strong platform for policy change, Engage Britain and the GAN need to consider how to articulate why VSCE organisations are best-placed to represent the communities they are part of, and how to address criticisms of gaps in representation.
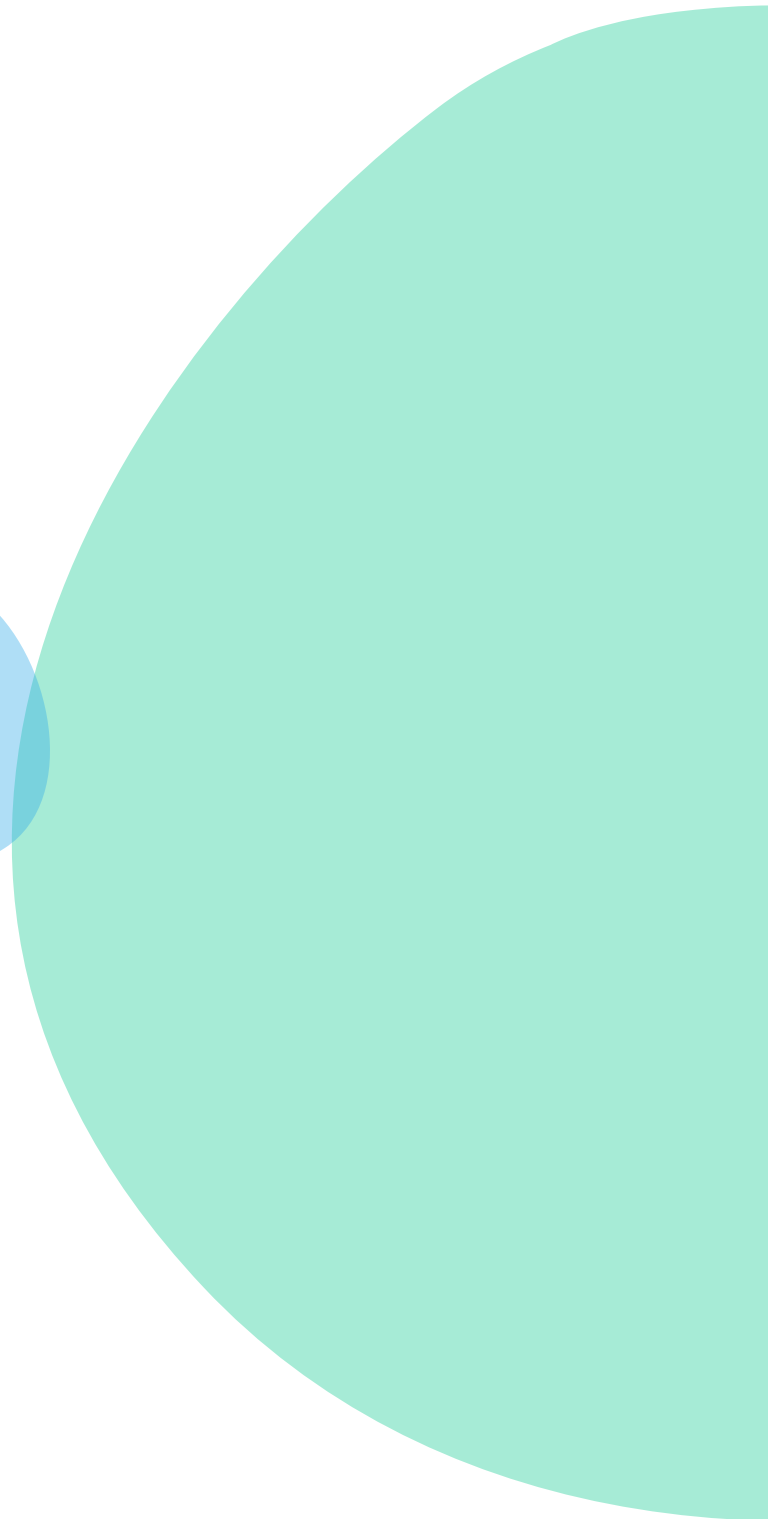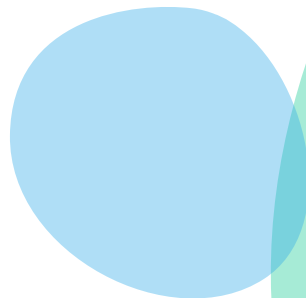
Decision-making apparatus

Although there was a strong emphasis on discussion and consensus during the table sessions, the final policy asks were determined not through dialogue but through a simple dot-voting mechanism. Given the time limits of the event and the multiplicity of perspectives in the room, the need to decide and limit the possible asks to the broadest possible platform was important. Even in a co-design process that emphasises negotiability of the participatory space, consensus may not simply 'emerge' through discussion within the timelines set.

However, the choice of decision-making mechanisms is important in shaping the outcomes of the co-design process. This choice was made by the GAN, in consultation with Engage Britain and TPXimpact. Moreover, the choice of decision-making mechanism could have been scrutinised by all participants as part of the participatory space. Alternatives might have included:

- **blind voting**. Rather than dot-voting, where participants can all see each other's votes, blind voting hides all votes until the final outcomes are aggregated. This could avoid 'band wagoning', where participants' voting patterns are influenced by the votes that came before (eg, an option that initially has few votes may be seen as a 'wasted vote' by later voters).

- **ranked voting**. Dot-voting assumes that each vote is equally weighted by participants, who may have different preferences between their three choices. Ranked voting can capture these differences in preference, although vote aggregation becomes more complex.

- **barometers**. Rather than asking participants to express preferences for a subset of options, barometers can get everyone's view on an item by asking participants to express their opinion on every option. This could for example use Likert scales from-2 to +2 to generate an average measure of opinion for each option (Stickdorn et al., 2018).

- **investment**. Participants are asked how they would invest a sum of money (eg, £1m) in the initiatives proposed. This helps participants enter a pragmatic framework where return on investment and feasibility is prioritised (Pip Decks, n.d.)

- **impact effort mapping**. Participants map ideas on an effort-impact set of axes, with 'low effort-high impact' ideas and 'high effort−high impact' prioritised into a strategic direction (Andersen et al., 2010).

Conclusion

The overwhelming mood at the Reconnection Summit was of hope for the possibilities that open when communities come together, and made emergent through the co-production process. Participants left the event energised and connected to a collective purpose.

The GAN and Engage Britain now face a difficult challenge in how to best take this spirit forward to those with decision-making power. Will these next steps retain the collective decision-making processes of the Reconnection Tour and Summit, or will they focus on transferring the expert knowledge of community representatives to inform decision-makers? Deciding on the right steps requires a careful consideration of how different approaches will affect the time it will take, the resource required, and the likelihood of successful policy change that delivers on the hopes of represented communities.

Whether the intention is to broaden policy-decision making to include communities or maintain existing structures but with greater use of lived experience as expert knowledge, events such as the Reconnection Summit offer a blueprint for a new movement of policy co-design in the UK. Rather than a narrow view where policy co-design starts with government, the Reconnection Tour shows the potential for VSCEs and third parties to build participatory grassroots platforms. Applying this approach to policy co-design across other topics and areas could reveal deeper learning about 'wicked' social issues that appear intractable.

The Institute for Community Studies, through this event and other projects focusing on participatory policymaking, seeks to identify toolkits and approaches that communities can use to build collective power and push for change. The work of the GAN and Engage Britain brings important learnings, from the many ways in which a policy process can be 'participatory', to the on-the-day choices that make a successful event. Most importantly, the Summit showed these methods can be a powerful force for a better future. We are excited to explore these methods further, together with communities and our partners.
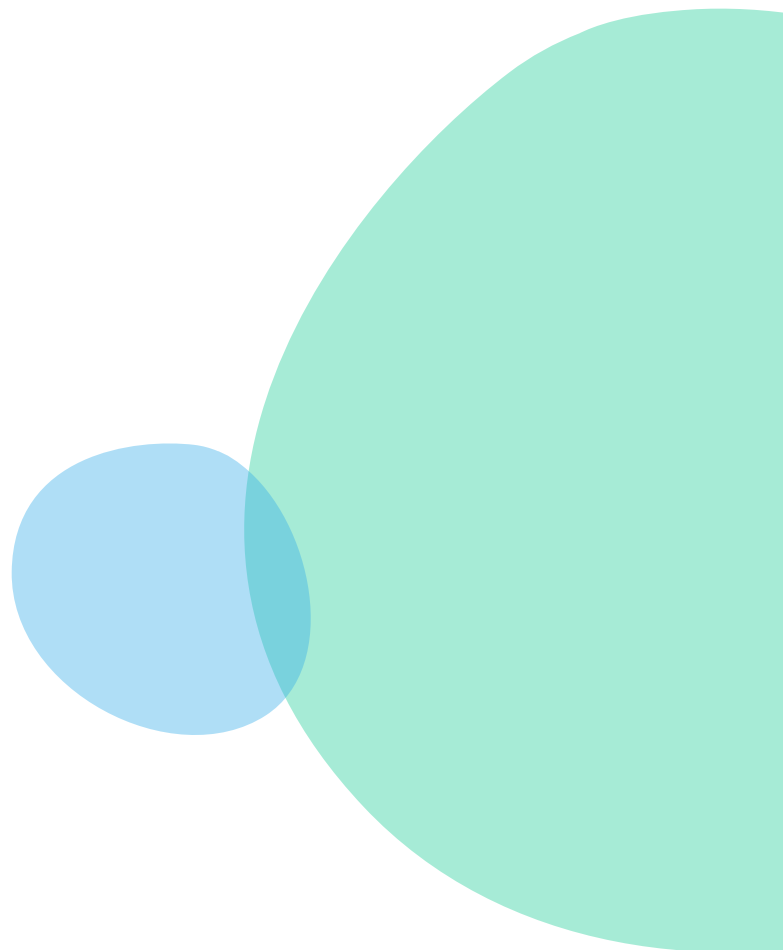
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