

Key takeaways: Consultation, engagement and development roundtable

Jessica Stewart, Managing Director (Comm Comm); Lord Banner KC; Cllr Duncan Enright Deputy Leader (West Oxfordshire District Council); Wyn Evans, Co-founder (SharedVoice)

Westminster



Jessica
Stewart



Lord Banner
KC



Cllr Duncan
Enright



Wyn Evans

Introduction

Good engagement and consultation in development has one key, persistent challenge: the widening gap between what consultation is supposed to achieve and what communities, developers and local authorities believe it actually delivers. This roundtable brought together practitioners, councillors and industry voices to explore how consultation can foster trust and good engagement to enhance project design and create more constructive dialogues between communities and development teams.

Many contributors stressed that consultation, in its traditional form, tends to amplify the loudest voices rather than reveal the broad spectrum of local sentiment. Exhibitions often attract the 1% most opposed, while the silent majority (who may support development or simply have no objection) rarely engage. Participants also highlighted how procedural constraints, inconsistent digital systems and a lack of transparency over viability shape public perceptions of housebuilding.

There was clear confidence that consultation, done well, can be an asset rather than a reputational risk. Early engagement particularly is an integral component of this. Another consistent thread was the need to modernise statutory processes so that community involvement focuses more on *how* development should come forward rather than rehearsing objections to development *in principle*.

Overall, the session revealed an emergent professional sector ready to embrace a more open and community-focused model of engagement, one that could substantially improve public trust and support better decision-making if underpinned by proportionate, modernised regulatory reform.

Key takeaways

- **Rebalance consultation toward representative engagement**

Traditional exhibitions capture only the most motivated of individuals, as they usually happen in daytime and in physical locations rather than online. These individuals are naturally more likely to be opponents rather than supporters. Attendees argued for embedding statistically representative opinion research (such as surveys, targeted outreach, mixed-format digital tools) so engagement outcomes reflect the wider community, including younger people, renters and those on social housing waiting lists.
- **Modernise statutory consultation processes**

Participants called for updated regulations enabling digital, accessible and timely communication by local authorities. Replacing newspaper notices with clear digital channels, short explanatory videos and user-friendly portals would significantly improve reach and comprehension. A caution expressed here was that any legislation would need to be futureproofed so as to not become outdated by implementation.
- **Increase transparency over viability and trade-offs**

Attendees saw clearer public explanations of viability assessments (including fixed costs, infrastructure requirements and implications of scaling down schemes) as important for rebuilding trust and countering misconceptions about developer motives.
- **Support earlier engagement at the local plan stage**

Many issues emerge because communities feel blindsided once applications appear. Strengthening and modernising local plan engagement would make later consultation more meaningful and reduce resistance to already-established allocations.
- **Strengthen the role of ongoing engagement during delivery**

Structured community forums bringing together developers, councils and local groups were highlighted as effective in maintaining trust during build-out, particularly on long or phased projects.
- **Encourage clearer public communication about developer-funded infrastructure**

Better visibility of what developments do deliver, such as schools, green space, transport improvements, could shift public perception and help counter the narrative that community benefits do not materialise.

- **Promote stronger positive narratives about development**
 Attendees noted the need for industry-wide communications that emphasise the societal value of housebuilding, including apprenticeships, social value programmes, climate performance and the local economic uplift.
- **Enable more consistent digital functionality on planning portals**
 Several participants observed failures in local planning authority platforms that prevent users from registering support or viewing comments. Ensuring standardised and functional digital tools would improve quality of participation and transparency.
- **Encourage responsible engagement from landowners and promoters**
 Early, proactive outreach during promotion and before application submission is a significant gap in our current system. Encouraging better practice at the earliest stage of the land pipeline could reduce later conflict and improve overall scheme quality.

Issues raised

- **Consultation dominated by a small, vocal minority**
 Exhibitions routinely attract the same limited group of opponents, distorting perceived community sentiment and pushing decision-makers to outsized objections compared with wider needs.
- **Lack of consistency and transparency in planning portals**
 Variability between councils (including portals that cannot register support, or systems that hide comments) undermines confidence and deters balanced engagement.
- **S106, CIL and pre-profit levies create confusion and distrust**
 Attendees described opaque processes, unspent contributions and inconsistent eligibility rules that make it difficult for communities to understand what will be delivered and why. Likewise, increased demands from a local authority has a knock-on effect on viability which will affect final outcomes such as social and affordable unit numbers or what type of local infrastructure can be delivered.
- **Viability assessments perceived as a “dark art”**
 Their complexity fuels suspicion that developers conceal profits or cut affordable housing without justification, even when schemes are marginal or require public subsidy.
- **Local plans insufficiently engage the public**
 Insufficient participation at the plan-making stage (as well as local plan delays which lead to non-allocated sites coming forwards) often cause local controversy, driving resistance long after strategic decisions are already set.

- **Political sensitivities discourage councillors from backing development**

Participants noted that a fear of electoral backlash discourages councillors from supporting needed housing, regardless of evidence or policy alignment.

- **Fragmented or inconsistent engagement across project stages**

Once outline consent is secured, engagement often falls away, leading to distrust when reserved matters applications come forward or if delivery encounters practical hurdles.

Conclusion

The discussion made clear that the planning system's current consultation framework is not well suited to the challenges facing modern development. In practice, the process too often magnifies the voices least representative of local need, obscures the realities of viability, and leaves both communities and councillors uncertain about how decisions are actually made.

Participants described a landscape in which well-intentioned developers are constrained by outdated statutory requirements, inconsistent digital tools and a political culture that frequently treats development as a reputational hazard rather than a social necessity. Yet throughout the roundtable there was also a shared belief that engagement recast and modernised can become a powerful driver of better outcomes.

What is needed is a shift in mindset and method. Early, transparent engagement, clearer communication of trade-offs and the adoption of more representative digital tools can create a more balanced dialogue and reduce the cycle of distrust that undermines so many projects. Equally, empowering local authorities to modernise their statutory processes, improving visibility of developer-funded infrastructure and encouraging ongoing engagement through delivery can help anchor development within a positive community narrative.

Taken together, these changes would not only improve the quality of planning decisions but build a stronger, more confident culture around development, one that recognises new homes and infrastructure as a public good, rather than a battleground for competing local interests.

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.



To get involved, please contact
secretariat@plghousing.org