

HIDDEN INSIGHT 21:
INCENTIVISING COMMUNITIES
TO PARTICIPATE



This insight considers how to incentivise communities to participate in community engagement events. There are many reasons why some community engagement processes attract few people. Invariably it is argued that they attract the same few people who attend every event and those that are actively being sought often fail to attend through a lack of trust and confidence.

This insight considers the benefits of incentivising people to attend which can include payment (but other methods can be used as an encouragement) to attend an initial event.

Increasing representation at community engagement events can only increase legitimacy and enhance the development of building social capital.

*#Incentivisingcommunitiestoparticipate #Increasedrepresentation #Developingsocialcapital #Activecitizens
#Communityengagement #Empoweringlocalpeople #Facilitatingchange*

Politicians face the same challenge as those working in the organisations they direct – how do they better understand the needs of the communities that they serve? How do they ensure their communities are part of the solution to what are often seen as intractable (wicked) problems?

- Local politicians are volunteers who work for the common good of society.
- They work for and on our behalf representing those who elected them, and those who didn't
- Each Council is run on the basis that Councillors set the strategic direction of policy which they believe reflects the interests and needs of those who they serve.
- Our democracy works on the basis that we entrust politicians to make decisions on our behalf, and if we don't like those decisions, we can vote them out in four years' time (or thereabouts)

This 'insight' draws on the learning around incentivisation and how it might act as a catalyst to engage those who are not currently involved in local dialogue about service provision.

Political engagement;

- Voter turnout at local elections is often less than 20%
- Those who engage in forums, committees and other structured forms of governance constitute between 3% and 7% of the population.
- The other 73% of the population often go unheard until elections.

“There is little evidence that the public want to dispense with representatives, but there are indications that the public would like a more open and more direct relationship with their politicians”

(Howe, C (2013) The Networked Councillor: A research report by Public-i for Improvement East).

In the same report it is noted that the 2011 Audit of Political Engagement described the public's discontent with politicians, but went on to describe the potential at a local level: “People are far more positive about the efficacy of getting involved in their local community than they are about getting involved in politics. Around half of the public (51%) agree that ‘when people like me get involved in their local community they really can change the way their area is run’...”

The challenge for politicians is how to ensure one person (the representative) understands thousands of experiences and ideas within a given geographical area, and inspires local people to become active citizens.

The majority of towns and cities within the UK have a rich tapestry of cultures which can make ‘representation’ challenging. With more listening, we encourage and create more learning. With more learning we become more ‘enlightened’ and tolerant. Listening and learning should be essential dimensions of our representative democracy.

MutualGain's experience has found that the electorate expect representatives (councillors and PCC) to encourage those serving us (police, health, council, housing) to gather our opinions and ideas in innovative and creative ways so that public services are improved.

Incentivising Community Engagement

When MutualGain was commissioned by a statutory agency to build the capacity of the workforce to better engage with communities they were keen to work in partnership with the local authority from the outset which resulted in local authority staff being given access to free training and support to deliver meaningful engagement. The idea underpinning this approach is one public service for one public.

A capacity building programme was used to generate fresh thinking about community engagement across statutory agencies. One small but significant part of that process was to use financial incentives.

A key challenge in most community engagement is how to encourage those who don't normally engage to give up their valuable time to share their experiences with those responsible for serving them. The intended audience in this city, therefore, was those who don't normally engage in gala events, surveys or council committees. Trainees needed to test the 'what's in it for me?' principle.

Many years of experience has shown that a financial incentive attracts those who NEVER engage. It doesn't need to be a large incentive but it can be the catalyst for attracting what we often call the 'hard to reach' (those who don't want to talk to those in authority, and don't want to use the normal democratic approaches).

Incentives accompanied by good, wide partnership planning processes guarantees high turnout and is tried and tested practice across the country. It is worth noting that you do not incentivise every meeting – just the first one to attract those who don't normally engage. Once they attend, you must make sure the event is inclusive, focused on listening, and results in action.

The engagement activity should feel good and leave people feeling positive and energised to engage further. With that in place you have a strong start to a new long lasting relationship with the public which will benefit the following groups:

- Residents – feel listened to, start to identify what they can do for themselves, and gain a better understanding of what is already there for them to access.
- Politicians – a wider set of residents who get to know their councillor (and may vote next time as a result of having a positive conversation with them!)
- Service Providers – a better insight into behaviours, opinions and solutions to what seem to be intractable problems

Opinion on the use of incentives can be divided and as such must be sought at the start of the process. Officers must be clear that they plan to use financial incentives (not just refreshments).

Although not officially 'controlled trials', one area in this programme tested the use of incentives and the other didn't. Decisions on the use of incentives were informed by local councillors. The area where incentives were used has a history of non-participation. The other area attracts a small number of interested and active residents who have an appetite to engage the wider community.

Feedback from both areas about the engagement itself has been exceptionally positive, but the difference was noted in terms of numbers. The area which used incentives attracted a much wider audience which reflected the diversity of the community. They discovered the views of new and traditional populations in a way they hadn't heard before, and are now actively working to improve their own area:

- 114 new residents engaged in a new neighbourhood watch
- Community organising has led to an application to use and fund an old public sector building as a community asset.
- Communities now task (previously unknown) community guardians to help clean up the area, and so the list goes on.

In the area that didn't use incentives a new programme of focus groups is being planned to listen to key absent communities. Building on their learning from the programme they are using incentives and successfully engaging with specific groups on specific issues.

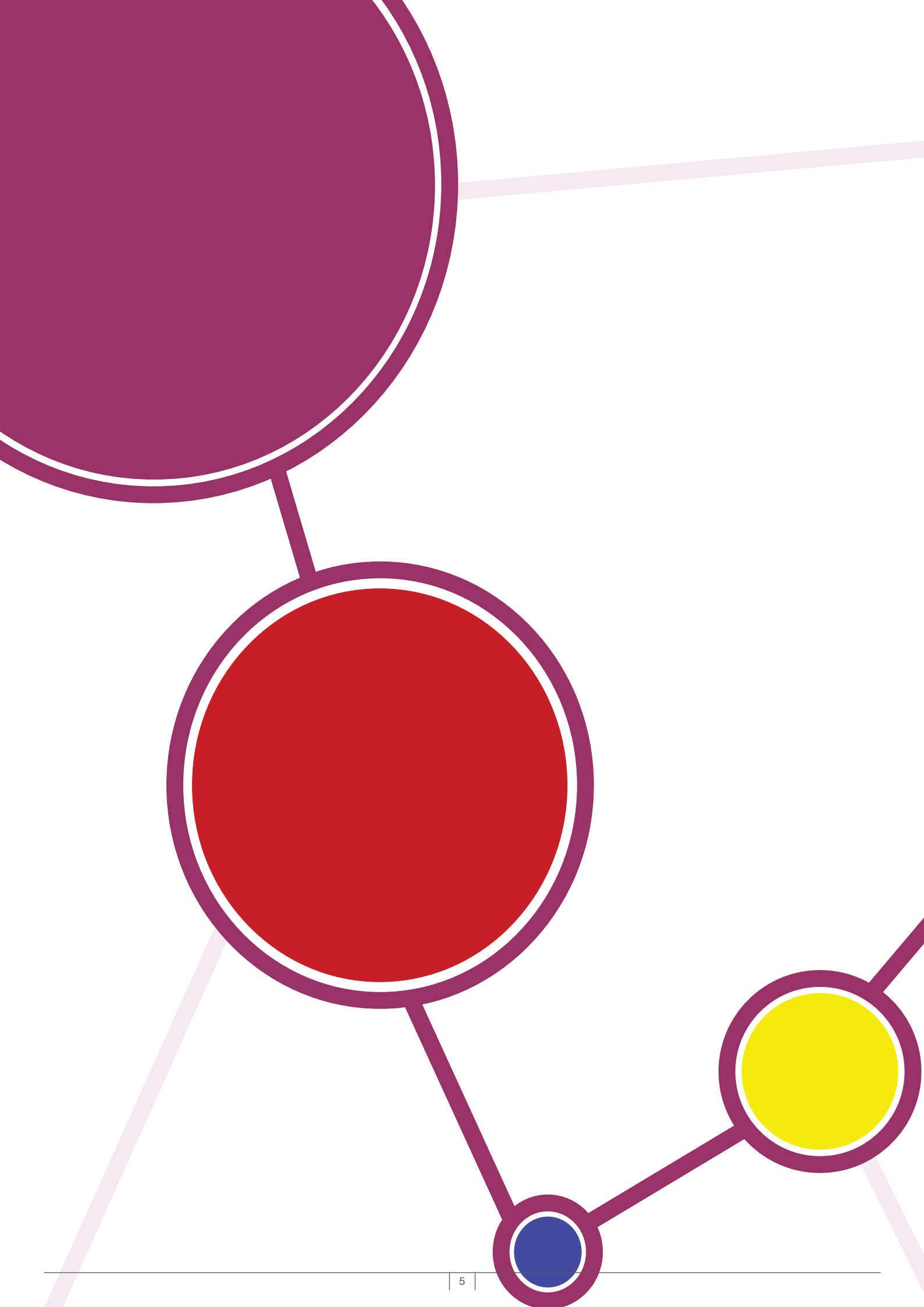
Some hints and tips drawn from the learning include:

- We often expect Councillors to be 'experts' in community engagement rather than representatives of their communities. Many have never been trained in the tools and techniques to increase participation, capture 'voice' or build capacity. By bringing their local knowledge of the area together with trained experts in effective community engagement the councillor is able to capture the learning and build new relationships with new communities.
- Despite living and working in an area for many years there is still a lot of untapped knowledge about the experiences and opinions of those who don't normally engage.
- Councillors should be a partner in a shared approach to delivery, and keep an open mind to the operational techniques used to attract non participants.
- Find out who else is struggling to engage and bring them to the table. In this instance the Housing Association had a budget to incentivise - they were able to provide a valuable resource for a shared outcome.
- • Attracting a large number of people improves community leaders' understanding of how the public are feeling about the police and partners, and how an improved relationship can be created.
- Communities want to see more opportunities for the 'resident voice' to be heard and they expect councillors to enable that to happen in the first instance. The challenge is they don't want to go to council meetings. By incentivising and designing new formats of engagement councillors demonstrate leadership based on active listening.

- In general, you should only use the incentive once and ensure that the experience you provide is one of officials listening not telling – that way residents will want to engage again.
- An incentive fund can cost a lot less than door knocking and has the additional benefits of a collective conversation when participants attend an event – new communities talk to long standing communities and identify their shared concerns and expectations.
- The use of an incentive is viewed by communities as a demonstration of how serious you are about listening – often they don't take their incentive once they feel heard.
- Make sure people sign for their incentive on the night but don't ask them to complete intrusive data collection forms, as this leads to suspicion about how you might use the data.

If we want a socially responsible and active citizenry (also known as social capital), we must incentivise people to come to the table to talk and share. Once they are there, we must make it a good experience. We won't have everyone actively engaged overnight but we can certainly start to build what is called 'social capital'. Areas that have high social capital, experience low levels of crime.

It is right and proper that our Politicians seek out fresh and alternative methods for energising our democracy. Exploring new ways of engaging residents in between formal decision points can not only contribute to better decision making, but can help to build cohesion in communities. We need to help politicians open up the democratic space and create a new type of politics which is flexible and inclusive to all.



020 3887 2859
info@mutualgain.org
www.mutualgain.org

 /Mutual_Gain

 /MutualGain/

