Engagement in the digital age

Research brief (DRAFT)

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Summary

Despite attitudes in policy and practice of 'digital first' and 'digital by default', **there is strong scientific evidence that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to digital engagement.** The research suggests that a flexible, adaptable and (where feasible and appropriate) hybrid approach - consisting of both digital and in-person methods - should be used to maximise the effectiveness of engagement, achieve its goals, and deliver benefits.

There is no single digital, in-person, or hybrid approach which guarantees successful engagement outcomes in all situations. Engagement processes are highly complex and context dependent: in almost every situation where digital tools deliver beneficial outcomes (e.g., increased efficiency or wider reach), there will be another situation where digital engagement can cause unintended negative outcomes (e.g., excluding and marginalising people). This research brief presents a range of **technical and ethical debates** around digital engagement and accessibility, inclusion, trust, transparency, power relations, privacy and security, digital well-being, among other issues.

There are opportunities to strengthen current guidelines, toolkits, and frameworks for delivering best practice in engagement processes. The research provides some **evidence-led recommendations** that can help enhance current approaches for understanding how we measure success in digital engagement processes by understanding what works.

These recommendations are particularly important to consider in an **increasingly digitised world**, where digital and physical 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 digital planning practitioners and decision-makers.

Summary of recommendations for effective digital engagement

The recommendations produced by this research take the form of **10 key thinking points for effective digital engagement** (see **Fig. 1**). These recommendations are aimed at practitioners, practice-enablers, and policy makers who aim to improve the strategy and/or delivery of public and stakeholder engagement in planning and other decision-making processes. They are relevant to organisations (e.g., Government departments, public agencies, and local authorities) that seek to embed a best practice culture of engagement, and/or practitioners who want to undertake more effective engagement and understand what works.

These thinking points can be used to complement and enhance existing practices, models, guidelines, toolkits, and frameworks for engagement. 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 accessible, rather than to act as a replacement for existing practices and toolkits. The key thinking points outlined in this research brief can be used flexibly to understand what works (i.e., what 'success' looks like) in particular engagement situations.

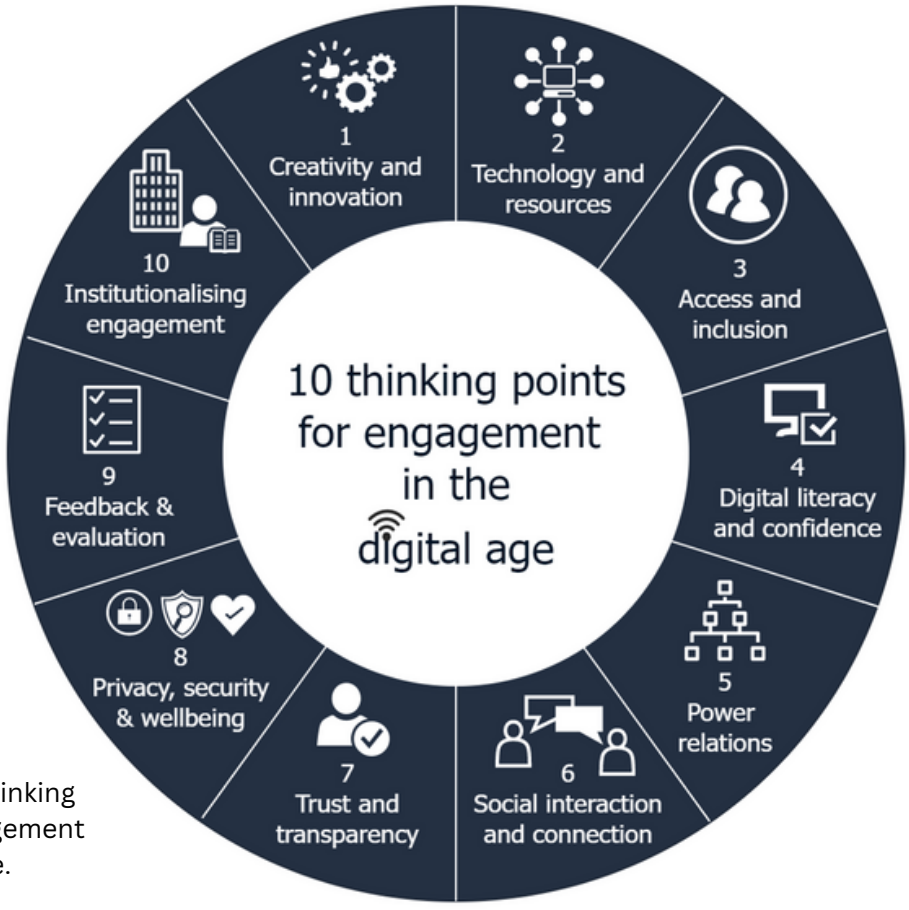


Fig. 1 - 10 key thinking points for engagement in the digital age.

Introduction

Digital technology is continuously transforming engagement and other participatory approaches in research, policy, and practice[1]. 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[2].

In the UK, national strategies for digital transformation and economic growth have followed a 'digital-by-default' or 'digital-first' narrative in line with the Governments aspirations to become a world leader in digital adoption[3]. 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[4].

Public and stakeholder engagement is vital for better quality decisions and more sustainable, equitable, and resilient outcomes for communities and places. However, there are still many unresolved questions about the benefits of digital and data-driven technologies and their effectiveness at addressing the goals of engagement[4]. 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. **This research brief provides evidence-led recommendations for understanding the extent to which effective engagement (i.e., engagement that is successful in achieving its intended goals and benefits) can be conducted in digital and remote settings.**

These recommendations are relevant for different types and levels of engaging (e.g., consultation, involvement, collaboration, and co-production) and along decision-making and project lifecycles (e.g., from the exploration of a problem to the evaluation of process outcomes and outputs). They are also relevant for a wide range of digital tools and technologies including engagement portals, social media, 3D visualisation, digital twins, Planning Support Systems, gamified tools, virtual reality, open data and e-government, participatory mapping, etc.

10 thinking points for engagement in the digital age

1.Creativity and innovation

Digital transformation involves waves of experimentation that can expose new opportunities for more creative and innovative digital engagement[5]. Using an array of different digital tools and media can be beneficial for creating more interactive, captivating, and inclusive experiences for participants[6]. However, digital tools and technologies can be too complex, lack interoperability, can overwhelm participants and cause digital fatigue[7].

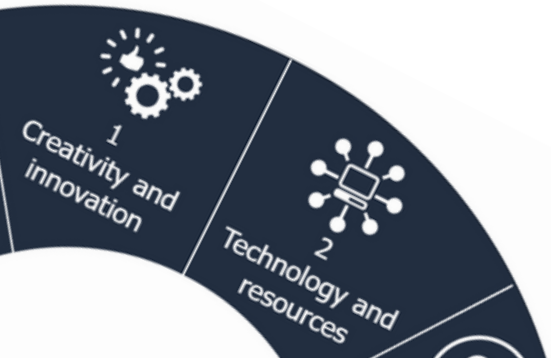
Engagement practitioners need to think carefully about the appropriateness and practicality of digital tools and technologies. While it can be tempting to select the most innovative, exciting, and efficient digital solutions, it is important to think critically about how digital tools will be used, their purpose, what the benefits are, and whether this matches the context that they will be used in. It is important to think through whether there might be more suitable alternative tools to use in a particular situation.

Engagement practitioners need to think carefully about the appropriateness and practicality of digital tools and technologies.

2.Technology and resources

There will always be technical issues and resource constraints that can impact the quality and reliability of engagement processes. These can include setup and accessibility issues, poor quality internet connection, outdated hardware and/or limited functionality, lack of access to equipment (and support using it), etc.[8].

There are various ways to overcome these issues including careful planning, identifying risks, and trialing/piloting digital tools with participants. For example, trialing digital tools with participants can not only increase familiarity with how they operate, but also help to develop important digital skills, and even build trust and rapport between those involved[9].



3.Digital skills and confidence

Lack of digital skills and confidence can be a barrier to effective engagement. The transition to digital engagement tools prioritises those with access to the internet and marginalises those who lack confidence, experience, and/or access to the means to work online. It is therefore important to think about the specific skills that are required[10]. This includes the necessary skills required for participants to be fully involved, as well as the skills and expertise that engagement practitioners have themselves to carry out engagement effectively.

Digital engagement can provide a valuable opportunity to develop digital skills, which can increase people's confidence using and interacting with technology.

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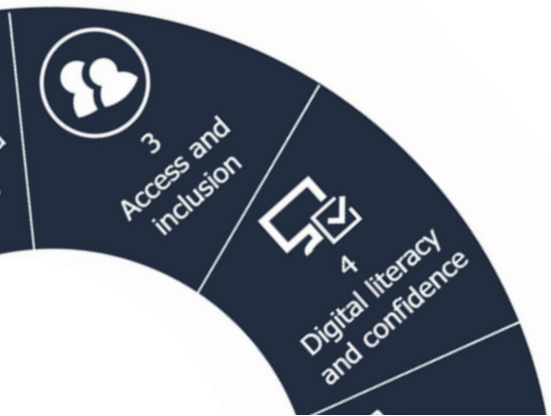


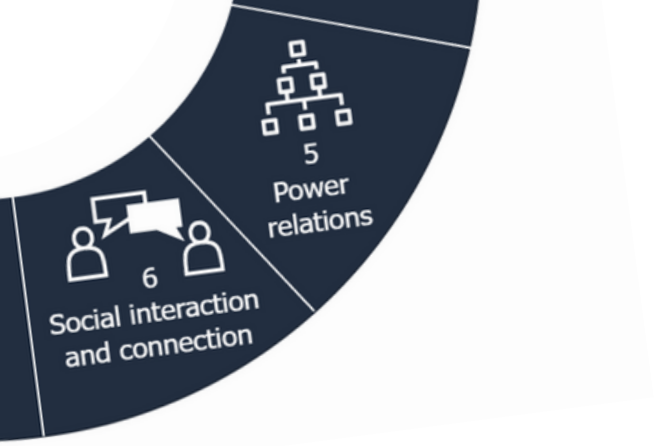
Digital engagement can expand the 'digital divide'.

4.Access and inclusion

It is important to identify who could be included and excluded before engaging, and consider how this might change at various stages throughout the engagement process. Digital tools can be more accessible for some people than in-person methods, for example, by enabling people to engage more flexibly and in their own time, reaching wider audiences, and including more diverse groups of people.

However, digital tools can always work to exclude and/or marginalise others. For example, digital engagement can expand the 'digital divide'[11] and (further) marginalise people based on socio-economic factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability, education, and income.

It is essential to collect data and feedback to provide evidence for who is (or who could be) included and excluded during the engagement process. The evaluation of engagement processes can often rely on very informal and anecdotal information[12], and it is important to have a robust and systematic evaluation strategy. This will require adequate planning and the necessary resources (including time) to evaluate engagement practices[13].



Power dynamics can change when engaging using digital techniques - they can become more equal, or they can become more unequal.

5.Power relations

Managing power imbalances (i.e., the way that different people, or different groups of people, interact with each other and where one of these sides is more powerful than the other one) is always going to be important for effective engagement.

However, power dynamics can change when engaging using digital techniques - they can become more equal (e.g., digital tools can act as a 'leveller' of power relations compared to in-person engagement), or they can become more unequal (e.g., digital tools can exacerbate inequalities and it can be more difficult to manage power imbalances online, compared to in-person)[14].

It is important to identify potentially unequal power imbalances early on in the engagement process and consider if (and how) they can be mitigated, for example, through skilled facilitation.

6.Social interaction and connection

Social relationships are essential for effective engagement and understanding complex issues. One of the most significant issues associated with digital engagement is the restrictions that can be placed on the social cues that are available in in-person interaction[15].

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 engagement and its outcomes (e.g., increasing mistrust). Digital tools can also be perceived as crude, over-simplified, and/or too focused, and it can be challenging to collect in-depth values and opinions.

It is important to think about if and how high quality social interaction can be achieved online (and get feedback from participants about whether it is successful from their perspective). In some situations in-person methods will be more effective than digital tools for high quality, personal, and meaningful social interaction.

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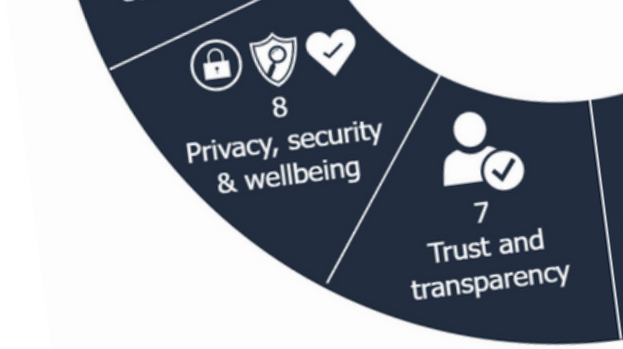

7.Trust and transparency

Trust and transparency are essential for effective engagement: if engagement is perceived as being transparent, open, and fair, then this can help to increase perceptions of trust and credibility in decisions and decision-making organisations[16].

However, it can be difficult to build and maintain trusting relationships in digital and remote environments. In online settings, it can be more difficult to build trust with people who are meeting for the first time, and the interaction among them can be limited[17].

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 more 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, miscommunication, and misinterpretation.

In online settings, it can be more difficult to build trust with people who are meeting for the first time, and the interaction among them can be limited.

Issues can relate to confidentiality and anonymity, bias and misrepresentation, data ownership, safe storage, and systemic issues related to structural privacy.

8.Privacy, security, and digital well-being

Mitigating risks related to privacy and security will need to 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. These issues can relate to confidentiality and anonymity, bias and misrepresentation, data ownership, safe storage, and systemic issues related to structural privacy[18].

It is also important to think about the impact of engaging online on mental health and well-being. Digital and remote engagement can impact the health and well-being of both participants and the practitioners conducting engagement, including digital fatigue, social isolation, and mental health[19]. In-person interaction can be vital for social cohesion and individuals' mental health.

9.Feedback and evaluation

There are numerous challenges related to the evaluation of any (digital or non-digital) engagement, and in addition, the findings of evaluation processes are rarely shared and/or lead to demonstrable improvements in engagement practice[20].

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 or not engagement is successful. Engagement should be evaluated continuously throughout the process (and beyond), which can be embedded as part of an organisational strategy for institutionalising engagement (see point 10).

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Engagement must be recognised as a long-term, dynamic, and continuously evolving process rather than an 'add-on' activity to existing practices.

10.Institutionalising engagement

To be successful in the long term, engagement needs to be institutionalised. This means that the principles and practices of effective engagement are embedded into existing decision-making structures in a way that they become the norm[21].

Engagement can be embedded as part of an organisational culture change. This requires an in-depth understanding of the reasons why engagement is conducted as well as current practices, assumptions, capacity and capability (e.g., available time, finance, staff, expertise, and other resources)[22].

Organisations must have the necessary infrastructure to provide sustainable support for engagement work. Importantly, engagement must be recognised as a long-term, dynamic, and continuously evolving process rather than an 'add-on' activity to existing practices.

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