

Leonie Taylor, Siân Whyte and **Laetitia Lucy** of The Young Foundation explain why community participation must be at the heart of development and set out some key factors for success

Planning with people





Founder members of the South Thamesmead Community Design Collective (CDC) take a break on the newly installed play equipment

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Anyone who has ever worried about their child's safety on a dark walk home, struggled upstairs with heavy shopping bags wishing their building had a lift, or been unable to get permission to revitalise a local park, understands the value of resident partnership in planning decisions. The lack of such things and more, often reflects a gap in how planning decisions are made, and who they are made for. They also reveal the cost of missed opportunities. When people do not have chances to shape the future of where they live, their needs are not met and trust in the planning system takes a hit.

A crisis of confidence

This is a problem for the planning sector. Research shows that 98% of people do not trust developers, and fewer than one in ten trust local authorities when it comes to planning large developments.¹ These statistics reflect deep issues about agency, power, and who gets a say in shaping the built environment. Whether it's a new housing development, a green space or an underpass, people do care – because these changes affect their daily lives. Yet many feel locked out of the planning process.

We at The Young Foundation believe in the power of participation² and that change is more meaningful, sustainable and *just* when it is shaped by the people whose lives will be impacted by it. Communities are not just recipients of development – they are key partners in it.



Residents of the South Thamesmead Garden Estate were engaged early to help create plans for redevelopment that would meet their needs

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The case for community participation: South Thamesmead

Places thrive when they are developed collaboratively, bringing local people's expertise and insights about their area together with the equally critical skills of architects, engineers and economists. The South Thamesmead Garden Estate made a compelling case for this. In regenerating parts of South London, residents were engaged not just to comment on plans, but to co-produce them through a community design collective (CDC) – ensuring that both the form and function of new spaces matched community priorities.³ In this example, local people challenged assumptions that might have been made about their communities, and shaped key decisions about their environment.

This approach supports better decisions.⁴ Development that reflects local needs and culture tends to be more sustainable, more used, and better maintained. It fosters stronger social connections and improves wellbeing; it builds civic pride and long-term stewardship.

Systemic tensions

Yet despite the many benefits of community involvement, it is still too often seen as a luxury – or worse, a barrier. Under pressure to respond to urgent issues such as insufficient housing supply and decarbonisation, developers and local authorities often treat community engagement as a tick-box exercise that happens late in the process, when options are



A rain garden at Thamesmead was created in close collaboration with members of the CDC

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limited and most decisions already made. This leads to friction, mistrust and even resistance. Take the UK's retrofit agenda: designed to reduce emissions and improve energy efficiency, it has stalled in many places due to low resident uptake. Why? Because programmes were designed **for** people, not **with** them. Engagement was late, rushed, and focused on technical outcomes rather than lived experience. There are several key factors that can help to ensure successful participation in practice:

Early engagement: A person-centred, place-sensitive approach that begins early and sustains involvement can change everything. It brings people along from awareness to adaptation. It builds trust, uncovers residents' priorities, and creates room for solutions that fit. In large-scale development, planning and delivery can take years, but communities are often brought in at a single moment, long after budgets are set and options constrained. Instead, engagement must begin at the very start of the project, before briefs are written and decisions made. Early engagement can identify challenges and unlock creative, community-rooted solutions. It also saves time and money by reducing objections and rework at later stages.

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Set a framework for success: One of the clearest examples of this in practice is Thames Futures. In 2019, The Young Foundation worked with Barking Riverside Ltd (BRL) to co-create a community vision for the area.⁵ This set out nine key priorities, shaped by residents, covering everything from transport and jobs to public spaces and social cohesion. This wasn't a wishlist but the basis of a bespoke evaluation framework, allowing BRL to measure impact, show progress, and stay accountable. This collaboration improved delivery and deepened trust – creating a model for how social value can

Special issue: Community-led planning

be embedded from the outset.

We were later commissioned to evaluate how well the priorities were being met. The findings were clear: Thames Futures played a pivotal role in aligning the project with residents' needs, providing a transparent mechanism for delivery partners to track and report progress. It set a new benchmark for what development with community can look like.

Support engagement: A key reflection we hear from residents is that co-production only builds trust and feels genuine if it truly supports local involvement. This means thinking carefully about when, where and how discussions take place. As one resident told us, 'I know there is a lot of community appetite for shaping our neighbourhood, but as a parent of young children I don't have time and activities aren't always child friendly.'

Sustain involvement over time: True participation doesn't end with the consultation phase. The South Thamesmead Garden Estate project again offers a compelling model. As the programme progressed, the role of the CDC extended beyond co-design to delivery and use, moving towards equal partnership in creating local change. The group helped to ensure that decisions remained anchored to community need, even when circumstances changed. The process wasn't always easy, but the benefits were clear. There was stronger alignment, a sense of shared ownership, and the community's use and enjoyment of shared spaces was maximised. The CDC's involvement in the manufacturing and construction phase could be adopted as a model by others.

Building for the future

As we look ahead, particularly in the context of ambitious climate targets, there is an urgent need to embed community voice as standard, not as an add-on. Local authorities and development partners could make use of social value requirements to formalise this. Nationally, we need policy that

recognises the value of participatory governance – not as a drag on delivery, but as an enabler of better outcomes. Participation should be embedded in planning decisions around housing and in meeting net zero targets.

There are also huge opportunities for local innovation within existing structures. As Thames Futures and the Thamesmead CDC show, it's possible to create new governance models that support empowered communities and improve accountability without changing the legal framework.

The power of participation

The Young Foundation champions these models not just in theory, but in practice. We work across the UK to help local authorities, developers and communities design engagement processes that are authentic, inclusive, and action orientated. We know that community involvement is how progress is unlocked. Key to this is seeing community participation as a long-term investment in every place. Because when developers work *with* people from start to finish, not just *for* them, streetlights will be well-placed, lifts will be installed where needed, parks will be better-maintained and more widely used, and residents' insights and local expertise can sit at the heart of thriving developments.

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Notes:

- 1 'Building trust'. Webpage. Grosvenor, 2019. www.grosvenor.com/property/uk-f346afcca4062fd904b22f82bec4831e/community-success/building-trust
- 2 H Goulden: *The Power of Participation: Our strategy 2024–28*. The Young Foundation, 2023. www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/publications/the-power-of-participation
- 3 *A story of participation: co-produced neighbourhood development with Thamesmead residents*. The Young Foundation, Sep. 2025. www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/environment-and-climate-change/parks-green-spaces-and-biodiversity/clever-cities-thamesmead
- 4 'Making a case for co-production'. Webpage. Future of London. www.futureoflondon.org.uk/knowledge/valuing-co-production
- 5 'Residents driving change'. Webpage. The Young Foundation. www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/impact-stories/barking-riverside