

Making meaningful public engagement with digital tools

The issue

Digital tools are increasingly used in urban planning for engaging the public in early-stage discussions and formal consultations in their local area. Investment in digital tools by both national and local government growing apace. We want to examine how involvement of the public in urban planning and development, particularly those facing health inequalities, can be made more meaningful.

Our response

With the help of our [Public Advisory Group \(PAG\)](#)*, a data expert and a creative engagement practitioner, we examined some of the tools already employed by local authorities for public engagement. We explored recent examples of the use of [Commonplace](#), [Engagement HQ](#) and [Participatr](#) tools with our PAG at a facilitated workshop.

Our aims were to (i) examine how the tools are presently use in the public domain and (ii) identify potential improvements and innovations.

*The PAG is composed of members of the public from different urban communities in Manchester and Bristol and is designed to bring the perspectives of lay people into the work of TRUUD.

The evidence

Key features and context

Digital tools are leased by subscription from commercial companies and are configured by local authority administrators for use in specific projects. They share multiple features including information-provision and online maps representing local areas where feedback from members of the public is collected through map 'pin drops' and associated commentary. Bespoke surveys are also common features. Capacity for audio voice notes, images and video to be uploaded by users is also common, but this function appears under-utilised. Some tools enable greater interactive potential, such as moderated public discussion fora and a dialogue function enabling person-to-person conversation through multithreaded comments.

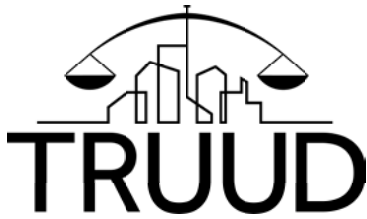


Local authority partners



University consortium





Public uptake of digital tools

- PAG members preferred clearly defined maps with bold colours. They highlighted how **mapping features, such as the drag-and-drop pins and comment functions, and overall navigation, can be challenging to grasp**. The PAG recommended the provision of concise instructions, questions and options for inputting information, to improve public understanding and prevent disengagement. Pre-testing the tool format and instructions/explanations with the lay public can ensure greater accessibility.
- **Translation options were frequently missing**, yet are essential for engaging culturally diverse publics. Even for those proficient in English, using straightforward terms and avoiding jargon is crucial.
- **Targeted strategies are required to increase digital tool use amongst all relevant communities**. These can include wider promotion of the online tools and in-person events where the public are supported to understand and utilise them. Parallel in-person activities, with physical maps and other materials replicating the tool's function, are also necessary. This is because some people may be uncomfortable using online mapping tools or have limited access due to visual impairment or socio-economic barriers due to the 'digital divide'.
- **Quantifying overall number of users through 'site traffic' only tells a partial story about engagement**. Systematic tracking of the socio-demographic background of users, through postcodes and other information, can ensure accurate understanding and interpretation of data. This enable analysis of sub-groups of local residents and other publics, for example, and better understanding of which voices are and are not being captured. This also ensures monitoring of the inclusivity of engagement and helps reduce the risk of certain interest groups dominating the public input 'narrative'. This enables analysis of sub-groups of local residents and other publics, for example, and better understanding of which voices are and are not being captured. This also helps reduce the risk of certain interest groups dominating the public input 'narrative'.

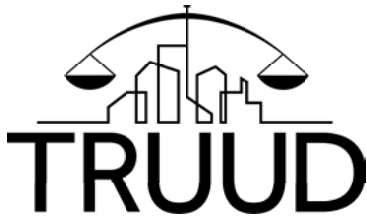
Feedback loops

As with any public engagement activity, the value of digital tools depends both on who chooses/is able to participate and how public input feeds meaningfully into the decision-making process. **Sharing the results, interpretation and outcomes of engagement is vital to retain public interest and build trust in the process**. Where dissenting views are expressed, for example - such as through feedback on maps - it is important to communicate how these have been interpreted and addressed. One of the tools reviewed was designed with a useful 'We Asked, You Said, We Did' feature in the header bar as a method of feedback.

Capturing Lived Experience

As TRUUD wants to bring people's lived experiences closer to decision-makers to promote healthier urban development, the following observations can be made about the tools reviewed:

- **Questioning tends towards closed, rather than open, exploratory questions**. Although this may make for more manageable user data and may still enable multiple responses, this inevitably 'funnels' response, limiting the scope of lay public experiences which can be included. At its worse this signifies a predetermined, potentially limiting and extractive line of enquiry.
- **How questions are framed also inevitably guides responses**. The more standard, line of enquiry in certain early-stage development scenarios, such as 'what do you/ don't you like in your area?' could be significantly enhanced through asking questions about feelings, emotions, meanings and values associated with a particular area, impacts on health, or factors contributing to character and identity of place, for example.
- Map visualisations which invite individual commentary on 'micro places' inhibit an examination of **linkages to wider locations and issues affecting both individual and communal lived experience**.



- **Different map visualisations could integrate existing quantitative evidence pertaining to any specific area in terms of deprivation, health outcome or Quality of Life data, prompting public reflections and discussions.** This might invite new, more expansive kinds of questions and introduce explorations of factors and relationships affecting health inequalities within a particular urban location, rather than unilateral input of opinions and preferences. This could help more communal and dynamic ‘conversations’, though this approach may work more effectively when run jointly with in-person engagement and discussions.
- Current under-utilisation of capacity for audio, images and video to be uploaded by the public suggests **potential enhancement through the sharing of materials depicting visceral, lived experience of the built environment**, which can be relayed to decision-makers to enhance understanding.

Next steps

Digital tools have significant potential for eliciting a wider range of public input [but ongoing research in this area](#) provides evidence that they should not, in their current iterations, be considered a ‘quick fix’ for scaling up or ‘democratizing’ engagement. They raise similar questions about the meaningfulness of engagement as do other methods. Continuing scrutiny of digital tools is merited in terms of equity of access, design of user input, impact on decision-making, as well as relative value compared with other engagement tools.

Our review suggests potential innovation in engaging with the public in terms of how questions are framed and lived experience is currently captured, particular during early-stage conversations in urban planning and development. These findings are informing a TRUUD intervention which will test ways of improving engagement approaches.

Acknowledgements

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About Truud

Tackling the Root causes Upstream of Unhealthy Urban Development’ (TRUUD) is a 5-year, £6.7m research project that aims to design policy interventions to support the development of healthier urban environments. Our research seeks to promote a fundamental shift in thinking about how to prioritise healthy urban development. We are funded by the UK Prevention Research Partnership.

Contact the author

For more information about our digital tools review please contact [Jo White](#).