**Title of manuscript:** Improving neighbourhood quality of life through effective consultation processes in the UK: Learnings from the project Community Consultation for Quality of Life

**Abstract:** The paper explores how the process of community consultation in planning can enhance the Quality of Life (QOL) in neighbourhoods, while also helping to collect data on the types of location that contribute to the QOL of individual and communities utilising the Quality of Life Foundation Framework. It draws on the project Community Consultation for Quality of Life, a UK Research & Innovation funded project involving experimental planning consultations in each of the four nations of the UK. Having described the rationale for the project and the methods used by the team it sets out a range of ways in which inclusive, map based, planning consultation can contribute to QOL by offering empowering opportunities to 'be heard' as well as a range of spillover benefits in terms of connecting people and organisations, knowledge exchange and sociability. Amongst other findings the project adds to the body of evidence that shows the vital role that 'nature' in the built environment plays in QOL.

**Keywords:** Quality of Life, Community Consultation, Participatory Mapping, Urban Room, Wellbeing, Urban Planning

**Word Count:** 7986

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# Introduction

This paper focuses on Community Consultation for Quality of Life, an ongoing 'four nations' research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK led by the University of Reading in collaboration with Cardiff University, the University of Edinburgh, and Ulster University. Its aim is to shed light on the way in which community consultation in planning can contribute both to quality of life and our understanding of quality of life.

This paper summarises the research context, the project development, and the findings from pilot exercises in each nation/region. Paper sections and sub-sections examine the way in which community consultation in planning processes for urban development is structured and most often carried out at various built environment scales and sets out findings that propose improved models that take more account of both individual and co-developed perspectives on Quality of Life (QOL) as core outcomes.

# 1.0 Literature Review/ Theoretical Framework

This section provides context for the four constituent parts of the project: consultation process and methods, urban rooms, participatory mapping, and the quality of life indicators bringing together social research, data analytics, GIS mapping and design. All of these fields have been comprehensively researched (Lawson et al., 2022). The originality of the project is bringing them together to understand and deliver on community consultation for quality of life with a unique in-depth examination of the nuances of policy, practice, and people-driven process across the UK as a holistic approach.

## 1.1 Community consultation in the UK

The primary aim of community consultation in planning is to gather feedback and opinions regarding specific planning proposals or projects (Lawson et al., 2022). This is different to community engagement which is a more comprehensive and cooperative approach that involves working with community members at every stage of the planning process, starting from generating initial ideas to implementing the final plan (Lawson et al., 2022). Community consultation, sometimes known as 'participation' (Jenkins and Forsyth, 2010), is a field of its own, generally sitting within planning, architecture and urban design, but also with branches in art and performance (Alexiou et al., 2012) virtual reality and computer gaming (UN Habitat, 2016). It can happen before, during or after project completion and is notoriously 'messy' (Askins & Pain, 2011). The project team have learnt from the wide range of existing consultation methodologies and platforms which tend to be used by Local Authorities and developers to explore the impacts of prospective developments, with an emphasis beyond long-established participation models (Arnstein, 1969) toward those promoting greater co-production (e.g., Rosen & Painter, 2019) and more inclusive, earlier, and central roles for local people in shaping their environments.

In practice, community consultation tends to be outsourced to specialist practices or public relations organisations within larger developers. This means the people doing the designs rarely have access or sufficient knowledge about the complex and diverse communities for whom they are designing, causing disjunction between the two (Lawson et al., 2022).

Nabatchi has developed a spectrum of public participation (Figure 1) that shows the level of communication expected by the consultees (2012). This is modified version of spectrum developed

by the 2007 International Association of Public Participation that is based on Sherry Arnstein's well known 1969 ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969). We suggest that community consultation in the UK is at the stage of 'inform' and 'consult', which is in between the one-way communication and two-way communication as explained in the Figure 1.

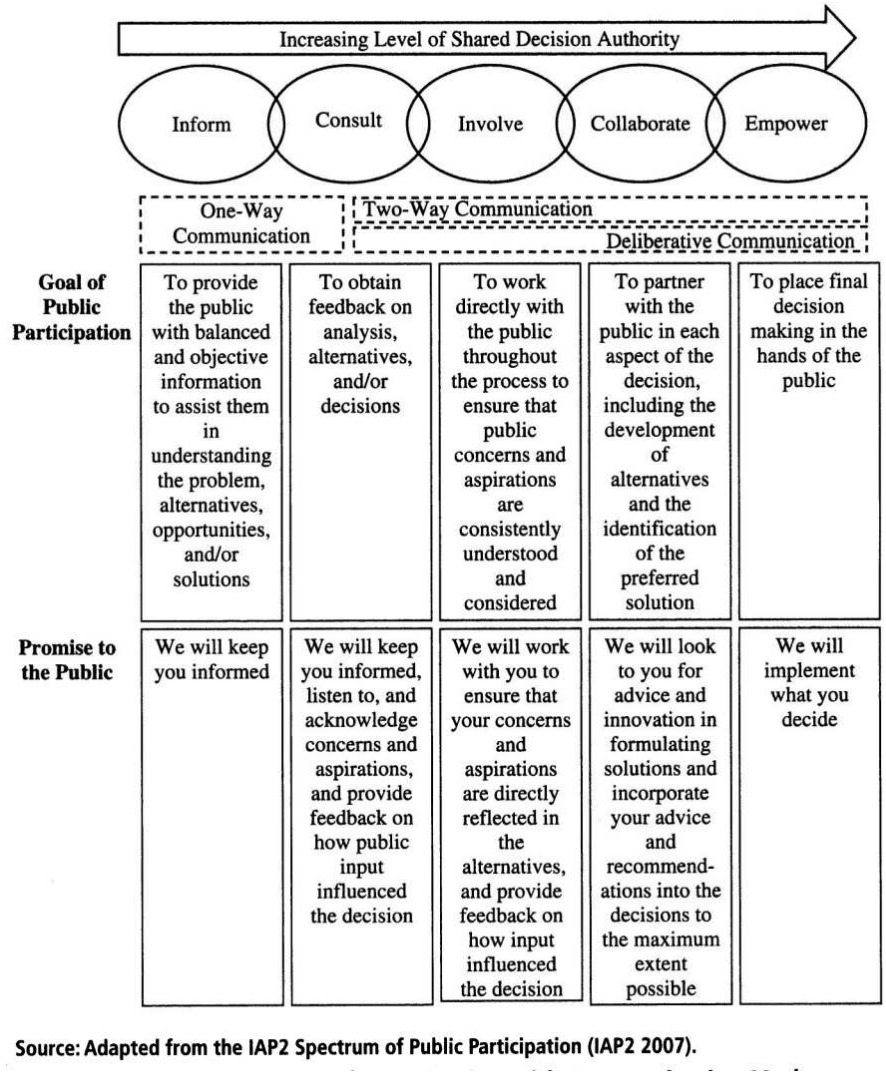


*Figure 1 Modified Spectrum of Participation with communication modes (Nabatchi,2012).*

The UK has evolved in the way it engages with communities since the 1966 Skeffington report to Neighbourhood plans, to Planning for Future, to ongoing The Levelling up and Regeneration Bill (2022); consultation plays out differently across the four nations of the UK (Lawson et al., 2022). Currently, the majority of those who engage in planning are over 55 years. Response rates to a typical pre-planning consultation are around 3% of those directly made aware of it. In Local Plan consultations, this figure can fall to less than 1% of the population of a district. Yet planning decisions are based upon this sample' (Mann, 2017).

## 1.2 Urban Rooms

The urban room, a concept with a rich history(Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2019) is a place to discuss local issues and to input data into the maps with the help of facilitators (Dixon and Farrelly, 2019). It is a version of the 'living lab'(Edwards-Schachter et al., 2012; James Evans & Andrew Karvonen, 2010), a

physical nexus of community, academic and industry research(Dixon et al., 2018) . Liveworks in Sheffield and the Farrell Centre in Newcastle upon Tyne are pioneering examples (*Urban Rooms Network*, 2022). Typically, an urban room will need to serve a constituency big enough to be viable and small enough to be accessible. Urban rooms are well suited to be a nexus of community consultation but are rarely used for this purpose.

## 1.3 Participatory mapping

Participatory Mapping is a growing research field, as demonstrated by the Participatory Mapping Institute at Aalto University in Finland. Community asset mapping has a long tradition in urban design, but no clear path has been established for it to feed in real time and in-depth manner into the planning system.

The spatialising of social value through participatory map making has been explored through Mapping Eco Social Assets (MESA) project, an in-depth study of a housing estate in Reading UK (Hatleskog & Samuel, 2021). A recent emphasis on relational(McQuire, 2008), as opposed to cartographic space has led to the development of new kinds of maps based on the interconnections between people and places. There is growing awareness on the potential of Geographic Information System (GIS) technology to map all manner of experiences and it is increasingly being utilised in a variety of creative ways. An example is the Know your Place maps of Bristol which allow visitors to explore their neighbourhoods through historic maps, images, and linked information(*Know Your Place - Bristol*, 2021). Through introduction of Voluntary Geographic Information System and followed by Participatory Planning Geographic Information System, for the first time public can have a say in how they perceive their neighbourhood (Basiouka & Potsiou, 2014). Recent research by Asiama and Arko-Adjei (2022) used Participatory Mapping to uncover indigenous knowledge on changes in land ownership, land use rights and land-use types over ten years. The paper found that 'properly trained local people can reliably delineate and indicate land rights and land uses in their environment on photomaps with little support from professionals' (Asiama & Arko-Adjei, 2022). This is in line with recent research that suggests that community science based data gathering can be just as robust as more professionalised forms of data gathering (Binley et al, 2021).

## 1.4 Quality of Life framework

This section focuses on the development of the Quality of Life Framework metrics. McCrea et al define Quality of Life in the built environment as being 'a broad term which encompasses notions of a good life, a valued life, satisfying life, and a happy life' (McCrea et al. 2006). Research into Quality of Life have some roots in systems theory about what generates subjective well-being, adopting a position that recognises that both endogenous and exogenous forces produce Quality of Life. The endogenous forces include the emotional, psychological, and physical responses of individuals as they experience life. Exogenous influences would include the social and cultural environments as they are brought to be bear on an individual (Ferris, 2006). Quality of life is a dimension of 'intrinsic value, (Bunting, 2008) an aspect of experience that is best evaluated qualitatively, or with a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods' (Kaszynska & Crossick, 2016). How to communicate intrinsic value in toolkits that often distil complex contexts to a numeric score is difficult, which is why it is so frequently left out of critical strategies that dominate the value management of our built environment.

Quality of life measurement is an interdisciplinary field that emerged in the evidence led context of the housing experiments of the late 1960s and early 1970s– a brief period when social scientists, architects and planners worked closely together (Samuel, 2018), but has been neglected of late in the context of the built environment. Wellbeing, quality of life, and social value can all be seen as

interconnected, if not synonymous, dimensions of social sustainability in the context of the built environment. In our experience, research in this area is industry dominated, lacking the backing of long-term academic study that is necessary to test its validity, one reason why the terminology is so slippery. It is an area that is briefly addressed by globally known Neighbourhood Sustainability Assessment tools such as the WELL Building Standard (WELL,2018) and LEED-ND which focus on capturing progress towards the delivery of sustainability goals. Quality of Life straddles a range of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 11 which is about making 'cities and human settlements safe, resilient and sustainable' but it takes only a cursory glance at the RIBA Sustainable Outcomes Guide (Clark & Tait, 2019) to see how difficult it is to align existing built environment sustainability measures and frameworks, most notably social value, with the United Nations SDGs.

In the UK, considerable work has gone into developing wellbeing standards for offices, the Flourish Framework being a leader in this area (Clements Croome, 2020). *Built for Life*, in its various iterations, has been used to for the Housing Design Audit (Carmona et al, 2020) to demonstrate many ways in which UK new build housing is failing. *Built for Life* was developed by industry with industry and is limited in its ability to capture housing impacts. Further its tone is one of policing poor design more than celebrating the multifarious ways in which housing and neighbourhoods can impact on quality of life. Presenting neighbourhoods in negative ways can in itself impact negatively on communities (Clapham, 2005). The Scottish Place Standard Tool is a useful tool evaluating place in a way that can feed into the National Outcomes Framework for Scotland, a method for charting progress against nationally agreed targets (Scottish Government, 2020). Overall, there is a lack of reasonably cohesive framework for measuring quality of life in relation to the built environment, as well as guidance on how long it should be measured (Serin et al., 2018). Hence the decision by a group of industry and academic experts advising the Quality of Life Foundation to develop the Quality of Life Framework to offer positive opportunities to capture quality of life at the scale of homes and neighbourhoods. It should be noted that the Scottish Place Standard has recently published its 'Place Standard Tool – Design Version' that shares many of the themes of the Quality of Life Framework, presented as a tool for conversations about design.

In an audit culture, organisational performance is typically measured against predetermined targets. Audit tends to begin with classification, and classifications are 'powerful technologies' that are both 'political and ethical' (Geoffrey C. Bowker & Susan Leigh Star, 1999). For this reason, as Bowker and Leigh Star argue, they should always be provisional and subject to constant review. The Quality of Life Framework is one such system, developed in 2020 by urban designers Urbed (also authors of the National Model Design Code) in collaboration with the Quality of Life Foundation. The QOL framework is being continually tested for its efficacy and appropriateness, with version 2.0 due to be published in the spring of 2024. The QOL framework is the big sister of the RIBA Social Value Toolkit for Architecture (Samuel, 2020), a post occupancy evaluation system which built on an extensive literature review, but which drew heavily on the New Economics Foundation's Five Ways to Wellbeing (Jody Aked et al., 2008). It also drew on an extensive internal review of wellbeing outcomes that was being developed by Atkins (2020) at that time.

In the Quality of Life framework, the key dimensions are related to the six headings: Nature, Health, Wonder, Control, Belonging and Movement (Urbed, 2021). Figure 2 shows the framework with its 6 themes and 18 sub-themes. The QOL framework is currently being tested and revised through a range of different research projects in the field, one being this project which references the framework to explore how quality of life in neighbourhoods might be identified through community consultation.

| | |
|---|---|
| **1. Control** | |
| Influence | Including co-production and participation in design, influence over local decisions and potentially involvement in management |
| Safety | Neighbourhoods where people can feel safe, inside and out and about, at all times of the day and night |
| Permanence | Schemes that provide affordable long-term homes with security of tenure |
| **2. Health** | |
| Housing | Well-designed and built homes with adequate space, that can adapt to the changing needs of their occupants, for example to allow home working or changes in family circumstances |
| Air Quality | Poor air quality is the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK. Healthy places where planting is abundant and where people can walk and cycle positively impacts air quality. |
| Recreation | Places nearby for exercise: cycling, walking and playing sport |
| **3. Nature** | |
| Green space | Access to outdoor space both public and private, including parks and green spaces near at hand |
| Interaction | The extensive incorporation of trees, planting and biodiversity to offer everyone daily interaction with nature. |
| Green Homes | Developments and homes that minimise whole-life carbon in construction and materials, and energy demand in use, and that avoid toxic materials |
| **4. Wonder** | |
| Culture | Places that provide opportunities for imaginative, cultural and physical expression that go beyond public art. |
| Distinctiveness | Places that are well-designed, have a strong sense of place and are special |
| Playfulness | Places where all residents, of all ages, are free to move around, to have fun, to explore and have a sense of independence |
| **5. Movement** | |
| Walking and Cycling | Places that encourage active travel through a design approach that makes it easy for most people to walk and cycle for their daily needs |
| Public Transport | Making it easy to get to frequent high quality public transport. |
| Cars | Minimising car use by prioritising other modes of movement, and accommodating cars in a way that minimises their negative impact on the local environment |
| **6. Belonging** | |
| Diversity | Neighbourhoods that provide homes for people with a mix of incomes, ages and backgrounds, in a variety of tenures |
| Community | Places that encourage opportunities for social interaction and foster a sense of neighbourliness and mutual support |
| Neighbourhood | A rich mix of uses, shops, parks, local services, schools and health facilities all within easy reach |

*Figure 2 The Quality of Life themes and sub themes from the QOL framework (2020)*

## 2.0 Methodology: Delivering the Community Consultation for Quality of Life project

The research project launched in June 2021 and completed in December 2023. Its central aim was to improve inclusion in planning consultation across the UK. What follows is a description of the project including the consultation process, participatory mapping, and the collection of quality of life data. The team benefitted from the input of an expert advisory group that extended across policy and practice into local authorities.

In order to build on existing best practice, the team conducted a thorough literature review of participatory planning practices within the UK, the initial phase of the project (Lawson et al., 2022) as described in section 1.0. The team simultaneously conducted several semi-structured interviews with experts from the industry, local and national governments, and academia to understand the consultation landscape. The project developed a methodology of conducting and testing improved consultation with mixed-methods research comprising of the urban room concept, participatory mapping, and the quality of life framework (figure 3).

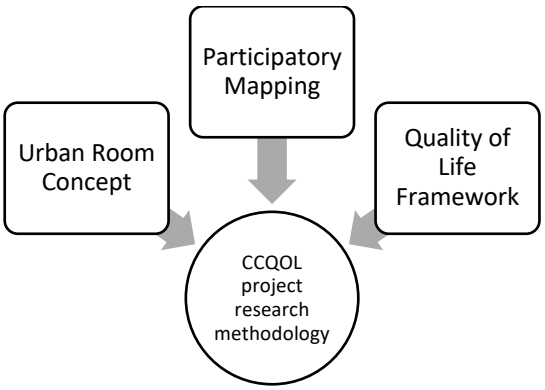


*Figure 3 Community Consultation for Quality of Life project research methodology*

## 2.1 Developing a toolkit for consultation

The team created a toolkit at the start of the project – a set of instructions for inclusive consultation. Its aim was to develop a consistent approach to mapping the existing demography and networks of the area to be consulted, the development of strategies towards reaching out to communities that are seldom-heard, the development of evaluation data as well as a timeline of activities. The toolkit was an ongoing document, coproduced and edited as the project progressed from one pilot to another.

The toolkit set out a series of important considerations in the design of the consultation process in the lead up to the urban room, during the urban room and post urban room (feedback). Firstly, it was important to decide the boundary of the area to be consulted and then to map out all the relevant stakeholders in this area. A web-based search and snowballing technique was used to gather a list of likely stakeholder groups. Stakeholders here comprise all the relevant bodies that should be consulted i.e., the local bodies, statutory consultees, businesses, organisations (art and culture) and community groups. This can be difficult as jurisdictional and administrative boundaries rarely coincide with relational space. It is however important to try to fix the space in order to develop a target demographic profile for the consultation by ascertaining out the demographic details of the area based on the standard criteria of age, sex, ethnicity, employment, education, sexuality, faith. These exercises helped the respective teams in conducting a gap analysis for each urban room i.e., to understand if the team has been successful in reaching out to all the communities in the local area.

A local advisory group was put in place for each urban room providing important links to projects and people, past and future. The Reading team led a series of 5 monthly meetings with the local advisory groups, whereas Cardiff led 6, Edinburgh led 8 and Belfast led 7, in the run up to respective Urban Rooms. The Local Advisory Group had experts and professionals representing the local council, planners, developers, university, local bodies and organisations and various community groups. These people helped frame the particular discussions that were held in each city.

Each urban room had its own core team members comprising the coinvestigator, community partnerships manager, student ambassadors, and research assistant.

## 2.2 Design and delivery of Urban Rooms

The next step in the process was the design of the Urban room and the planning of the events to take place in it. Through continuous engagement with the organisations, their needs and requirements were assessed. The question the team discussed with the organisations was how to achieve engagement in consultation across a wide range of community demographics, whether by entering the urban room, engaging online, or by adjusting with other methods appropriate to each group or individual.

Following the processes mentioned above, a programme of events was planned and delivered. Successive urban rooms had multiple elements for participants to engage such as an interactive map on the wall, exhibitions, games, daily events for knowledge sharing, making, or networking, and digital tablets to do online consultation surveys. Each urban room was designed to be a warm, friendly space with trained staff who were there to welcome people. The urban room was aimed to create a physical space where people from the neighbourhood/ town/city could learn, share, discuss, ideate, debate, and feel heard.

### 2.2.1 Reading Urban Room – Your Place Our Place

The Reading Urban Room, titled “Your Place Our Place” was operational between March 1st and March 31st, 2022, and was situated in an unoccupied store in the bustling Broad Street Mall, located in the city centre. The aim was to develop a design that could adapt to users' needs and be flexible. The organizers aligned the five-week duration with the Reading Council's Town Centre Strategy and created various sessions in collaboration with local charities, non-governmental organisations, and institutions. The Urban Room hosted more than 60 sessions and welcomed an average of 200 visitors each week.

The Urban Room created several entry points for individuals to participate. It was open to local shoppers, curious onlookers, attendees of specific sessions, members or staff of local organisations, members of the local community, visitors who came to view the permanent and temporary exhibits, and those who interacted with the wall map. The area even had a table tennis table to promote physical activity. Reading also utilised the space to pilot a consultation area with autism-friendly design.

Information about the project: https://ccqolreading.commonplace.is/

One of the student ambassadors in the Reading Urban Room team was a master’s in architecture student. As a part of thesis research topic, the student possessed a deep understanding of the difficulties that neurodivergent individuals may confront when navigating within conventional architectural settings.


*Figure 4 Layout of Reading Urban room to test consultation space for neurodiverse groups. Source: Shanzina Alam*

The student designed and tested the Reading urban room for two days with a focus on maximising accessibility (Figure 4) as a part of her project. This case study is published in the Reading local report, and provided valuable insights and learnings across various aspects, including outreach, co-design, and the importance of taking incremental steps. While this experiment represented a small step, it served as an important milestone in the pursuit of designing urban rooms that are adaptable to meet the needs of individuals from diverse backgrounds.

### 2.2.2 Cardiff Urban Room – Community Voices Cardiff

The Cardiff Urban Room, known as “Community Voices Cardiff”, operated for four weeks, from May 3rd to May 28th, 2022. The urban room was designed as a ‘hyper-local’ space in the heart of a

residential neighbourhood of 20,000 people. It shared a room with other regular groups in the well-established but recently redeveloped community-owned Grange Pavilion facility, which formally launched during the urban room following a ten-year coproduction process. The primary goal of the urban room was to foster connections between residents and organisations. To achieve this, the Community Partnerships Manager and Student Research Intern were area residents with established networks.

The Local Advisory Group identified four themes that represented local area priorities: Health and Wellbeing, Housing, Green Spaces, and Young Voices. The project team organised 19 activities, and also participated in 23 activities led by other organisations. These activities included launch party, "flipped" discussion sessions that brought together local authority representatives, built environment professionals, and residents to review consultation language and approaches.

The Cardiff pilot was bilingual, with a Welsh language version of the website. The team also developed a separate interface for under-18-year-olds, which used the same maps but collected no personal data.

Information about the project: https://communityvoicescardiff.commonplace.is/

### 2.2.3 Edinburgh Urban Room – Our Edinburgh Neighbourhood

The Edinburgh Urban Room, called "Our Edinburgh Neighbourhood," was in a central position next to the city's main railway station within a shopping centre. The space was designed for meetings, co-creation workshops, and exhibitions and presentations. Community groups were free to organise any event they wished, and the space was configured and recorded for each event to better understand how co-creation could be achieved effectively in urban rooms.

The purpose of the exhibition was to offer insights into the future planning of Scotland and the importance of engaging with local communities. The focus was on the concept of 20-minute neighbourhoods, which highlighted the significance of building strong relationships between local communities and city centres.

To ensure inclusivity, a series of local residencies were organized to accompany the city centre urban room project. This allowed for the project to be taken out to local neighbourhoods. The demographic of residents in central Edinburgh was predominantly middle-class, consisting of young to middle-aged adults who were well-educated and healthy. To address the issue of under-served areas with limited access to essential services, retail, employment opportunities, and recreation, the project was expanded to include the neighbourhoods of Liberton and Restalrig in the east and south of the city.

Our Edinburgh Neighbourhood was held from June 13th to July 9th, 2022, and featured 17 events in the urban room.

Information about the project: https://www.ouredinburghneighbourhood.org

### 2.2.4 Belfast Urban room – Your City Your Voice Belfast

From September 5th to September 27th, 2022, the Belfast Urban Room operated as "Your City Your Voice Belfast" in partnership with Belfast City Council sharing the use of a large Council-owned cultural venue called 2 Royal Avenue, located in the city centre. As a flexible and already adapted public meanwhile space, the space provided a unique test location for Belfast Urban Room pilot as it did not have a permanently enclosed room. Instead of a fixed space, the urban room team worked with Belfast City Council appointed venue and event managers and a social enterprise-run café to co-ordinate between the project and council hosted activities, working from a core exhibition area and

expanding or contracting depending on the types and sizes of activities and exhibitions. This approach was symbiotic and supportive, benefiting visitor numbers and contributions.

The theme of the room was developed through continued Local Advisory Group discussion and evolved in line with council's aim of enhancing Belfast's quality of life and promoting long-term activity and living in what has been a primarily non-residential city centre compared with other capital cities. The room and themes also developed in recognition of remaining a neutral space for all to visit and an honest broker for people to share their perspectives, acknowledging Belfast's unique challenges from long-standing sectarian division and violence that have affected public trust and hindered development progress in the city. With support from the Local Advisory Group, the Belfast Urban Room focused on establishing an open-ended link to the Quality of Life Foundation's Framework.

Information about the project: https://yourcityyourvoicebelfast.commonplace.is/

## 2.3 Participatory mapping

The data collection phase of the project involved the trialling of map based consultation methods in four urban rooms in each of the different countries of the UK for four weeks each – Reading, Cardiff, Edinburgh, and Belfast. Participatory Planning Geographic Information System (GIS) was the core of the consultation project. The aim was to demonstrate a way to capture what people value about their local areas in a live and ongoing database which can inform future decision making. To achieve this, the project developed a platform for people to feed into multi-layered maps using the Quality of Life Foundation's framework.

The digital platform was provided by the project partner Commonplace. This was a data collection tool, with essential functionality of georeferencing in shared digital space. It had an introductory page describing the project, a page for putting pins on the map and describing these pins and followed by page on a survey on public participation. The menu bar gave links to the timeline of the project, news section, and the team page. A separate participation survey accessed from the same page was designed to capture people's experiences of consultation and their demographics. The Participatory Planning GIS tool was intuitive and was created with accessibility tools to help digitally challenged people by having options to increase or decrease the font, dyslexia friendly font, brighten the screen. Language barriers were addressed through a note on how to use the Google Chrome extension to help translate the website. Figure 5 shows the landing page with introduction and different tiles that take the participant to different pages of the website.

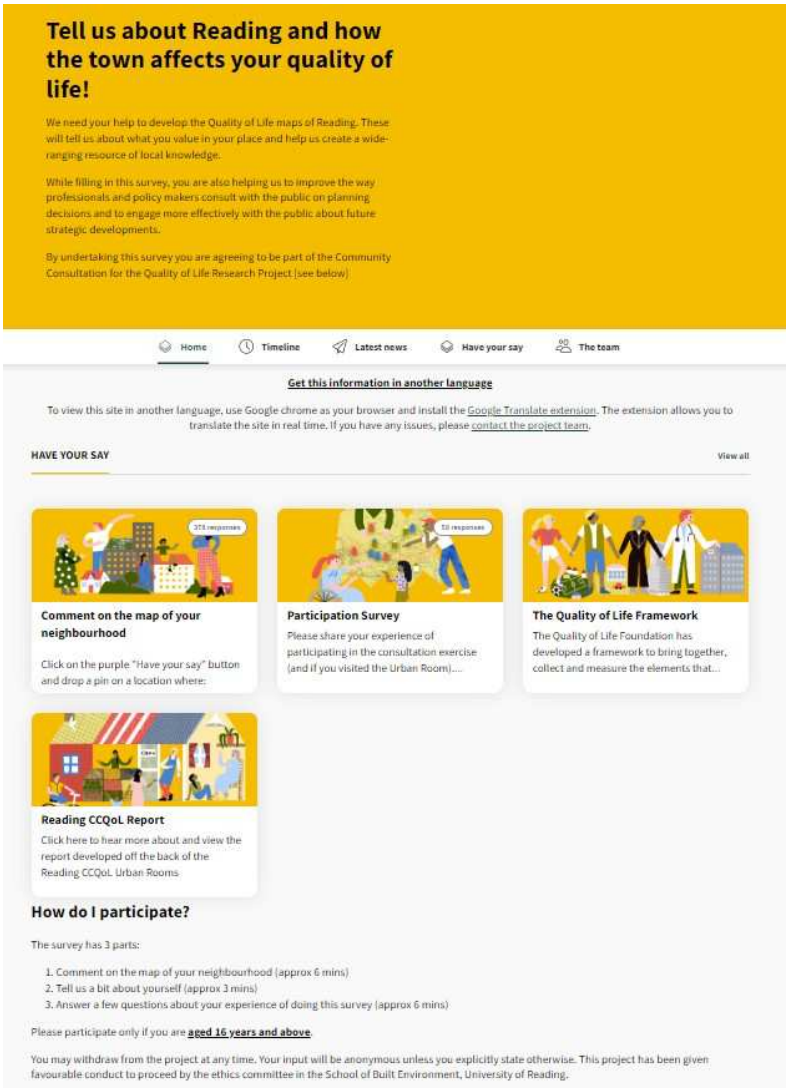


*Figure 5 Screenshot of the Reading project website: example design of the Participatory Planning GIS tool*

The team worked at length on the design of the mapping survey. The process of putting a pin on the map was created through a user journey. Prior to putting a new pin, the participant would have the option to view all existing pins and read the comments made by other participants. Instead of dropping a new pin, a participant could also click on "I agree" if they were in agreement with any existing pins. This tool thus gave a chance for informed decision-making, and a chance for participants to deliberate with themselves before they put a new pin.

### 2.3.1 The evolution of the Participatory Planning Geographic Information System tool across the four pilots

The Commonplace website developed considerably as the pilot projects progressed. Figure 6 shows how the mapping survey had a consistent framework with adaptations for each area and in response to lessons from each pilot informed the next. Cardiff and Belfast chose to have 2 websites, one for under 18s and other for adults. Commonplace typically asks for an email address so that contributors can hear about the follow up on their consultation, but this was removed for the version that was used with children in Cardiff. Cardiff also had a Welsh version their digital and physical information and mapping tools, with dual language a statutory requirement in Wales. The Edinburgh team

developed its own branding in terms of colours, with a focus on 20-min neighbourhood (described in section 3.3.3). In time for the Belfast pilot project, Commonplace introduced a new version which helped the pins to have a special icon in relation to the six themes. It is important to note that Commonplace has inbuilt accessibility functionality and that the site can readily be translated using Google Translate.

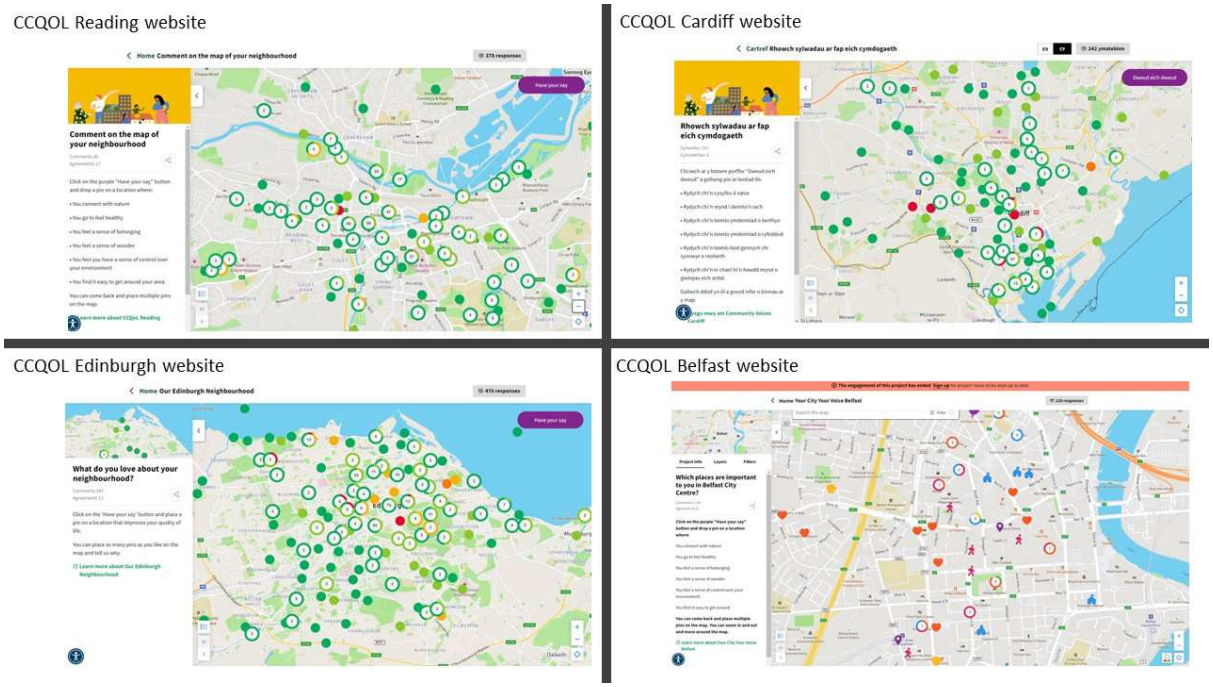


*Figure 6 Website Development Journey*

# 3.0 Findings and Discussion

In this section we outline the findings of the project with a focus on the way in which it contributed to quality of life through its process as well as the way it contributed to our understanding of the issues that contribute to quality of life and the ways in which they might be measured.

## 3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

When measuring quality of life, it is important to gather both quantitative and qualitative data in order to gain a nuanced view of what is happening in a place (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). An audit culture favours quantitative data over qualitative data because it is easier to operationalise through systems and spread sheets. This accountancy type tendency has reached an extreme form with the monetising of social value through social return on investment using financial proxies to represent hard to measure things such as wellbeing. Such systems do not often take individual community variations, demographic shifts, life-long experience, and newer perspectives into account enough to deliver the quality of place-based outcomes most likely to provide a higher quality of life for all.

All this seems likely to change with the advent of new technologies that are helping us to code and quantify kinds of data that were previously difficult to capture, including images and even sound. Researchers have for some time been coding qualitative information through software such as NVivo. Spatial planning and consultation lag behind other fields because of both a tendency for spatial design professional to avoid such types of tabular tools, and a lack of investment in tools more suited to applying data to spatial challenges effectively (Wilson & Tewdwr Jones, 2021).

The consultation process went on for a total of 81 days over a span of 17 weeks. The 4 Urban rooms in Reading, Cardiff, Edinburgh, and Belfast hosted 116 sessions (excluding the shared sessions hosted by project partners). Across nations, the 4 teams engaged with a total of 300 organisations and more than 5000 people. Each team had its own social media (Facebook and Instagram) pages to promote the platform, offer live stories of how participants were using the urban rooms, as well as how useful attending sessions and participating in the consultations was to them. Through the Commonplace websites in each pilot, the team collected close to 1400 pins on the maps and 900 participation surveys. At the same time the teams reached out to the participants and participating groups for their feedback on the consultation process during and after the urban rooms. The team used a mixed methods ways of collecting this data. They employed various quantitative and qualitative tools for this process as described next.

### 3.1.1 Observation Methods

Each pilot team in Reading, Cardiff, Edinburgh, and Belfast comprised of the coinvestigator, community partnerships manager, student ambassadors, and research assistant. All staff members were trained to collect data in a cohesive format. Personal reflections captured during the consultation journey were captured through fieldnotes.

### 3.1.2 Participation Survey

Once a participant completed the Participatory Planning GIS survey i.e., dropping pins on the map as described in section 2.3, they were automatically taken to the next page on a demographic survey. This was voluntary and they would be expected to share details on age, gender, religion, disability, employment, and other standard criteria. This was followed by a participation survey to capture feedback on their experience of past consultations, the experience of this particular digital consultation, their experience of urban rooms and how they think consultations could be made more inclusive. The participation survey evolved as it travelled the pilots. Some questions deemed to repetitious were removed. But there were new additions from the respective teams depending on their area of research. For example, Edinburgh team asked a couple of questions specific to the 20-minute neighbourhood.

### 3.1.3 Post Urban Room Interviews and feedback

Each project team reached out to its Local Advisory Group, participating groups and organisations and select individuals who participated repeatedly to gather qualitative feedback on the urban rooms. This was done through either a semi-structured interview or a survey with similar questions.

### 3.1.4 Local reports to stakeholders and community

One of the learnings from the literature review was that communities need to know what the outcome was of the consultation. To ‘close the loop,’ the respective pilot teams prepared Local Reports for their communities from the data collected and analysis and disseminated these to consultation participants through the respective websites mentioned in section 2.2, and, in some cases, a public launch event with people who had participated in the consultation.

## 3.2 Consultation toolkit

The consultation process developed through the project in the first pilot (Reading) was tested and adapted as planning for other pilots progressed (figure 7).

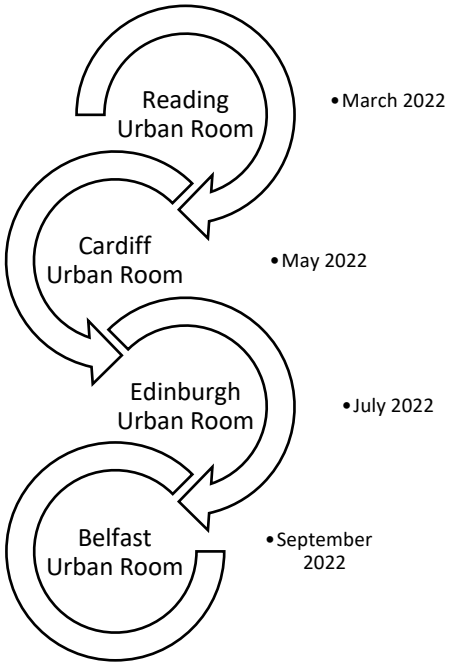


*Figure 7 Validating learnings from one urban room to next*

This process of engagement and data gathering forms the crux of the inclusive engagement toolkit (Figures 8 and 9) which has been published as an output for an industry audience by the team (Edwards and Purohit, 2022). Figure 8 explains the thorough process of consultation, i.e., pre-urban room, during the urban room, and post-urban room whereas figure 9 details out the steps during the urban room.

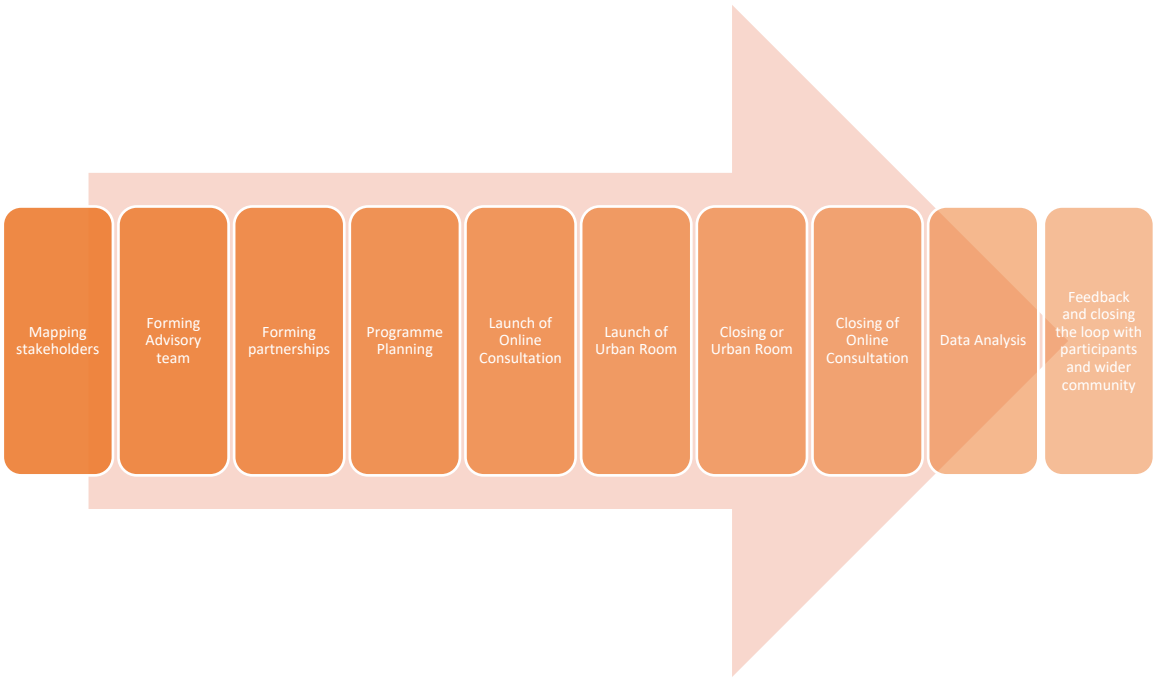


*Figure 8 Consultation toolkit: From Understanding communities to closing the loop*

The core team in each pilot worked in unison and multiple capacities throughout the consultation process. They all participated in coproducing respective urban rooms, and worked with a diverse skillset of design, planning, graphics, (collecting data), delivery, social media, etc. The role of the Community Partnerships Manager was crucial to this as it required building relationships with varied groups and communities, building partnerships, being transparent and honest with them in what was required of them, and making them feel included in the consultation process.

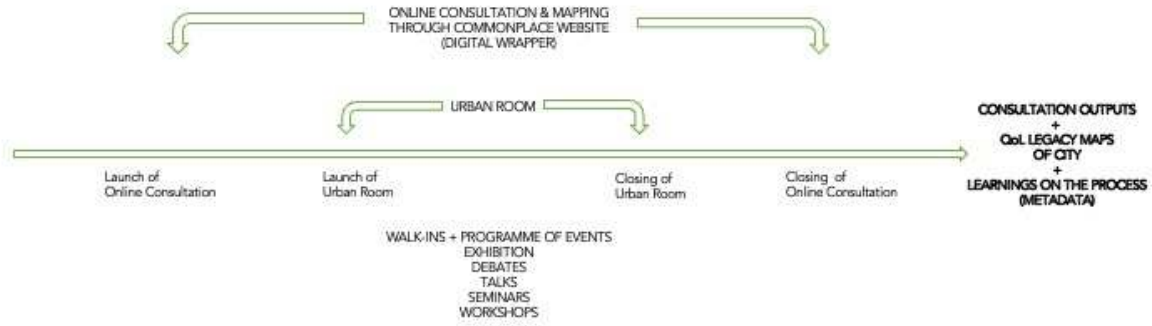


*Figure 9 Urban room processes*

Although figure 8 provides a linear journey through consultation, there were many points when the teams had to go back to the drawing board and start again.

The teams confirmed through observation that consultation is a difficult process. Talking to people and listening to them can be challenging. Creating a physical or online space in which people feel heard is a skill that is acquired via practice and experience. People need a space to talk, and sometimes a space to vent out. These community consultations offered this space for venting. There were multiple times when student ambassadors and other staff in the Urban Room had to clarify to the participants that they did not represent the local authority. Issues raised within the urban room were not always related to planning remits, highlighting the difficulties planning consultations encounter when there is limited scope to address broader challenges experienced at local level. The urban rooms offered a space which gave the people an agency to be themselves.

Survey data also highlighted the extent to which urban rooms were viewed by people as a place to connect with others, to exchange information, to hear other's views, and to feel part of a community. The role of the urban room as a space for forming new relationships and networks suggests a legacy component for ongoing consultation processes, in which connections and networks formed through the urban room may be able to support longer-term consultation processes.

## 3.3 Learnings from the Urban Room

The project tested 4 distinct and unique Urban Rooms in the four pilots, but also, they had common principles of engagement. Each Urban Room was flexible and adaptable, open for diverse communities, groups, and organisations, and aimed to lower the barriers to participation.

Figure 10 displays the calendar of programmes created by respective urban room pilots. These calendars provided multiple entry points for participation such as events ranging from business meets to art groups to mental health seminars, walk-in sessions, events, talks from experts,

discussion with disabled groups, workshops with school children, cultural practices, games, architecture walks, and pop-up urban rooms, meditation, massage, parent and toddler groups, festivals, launch and closing ceremonies and other multiple opportunites created by local partner organisations.

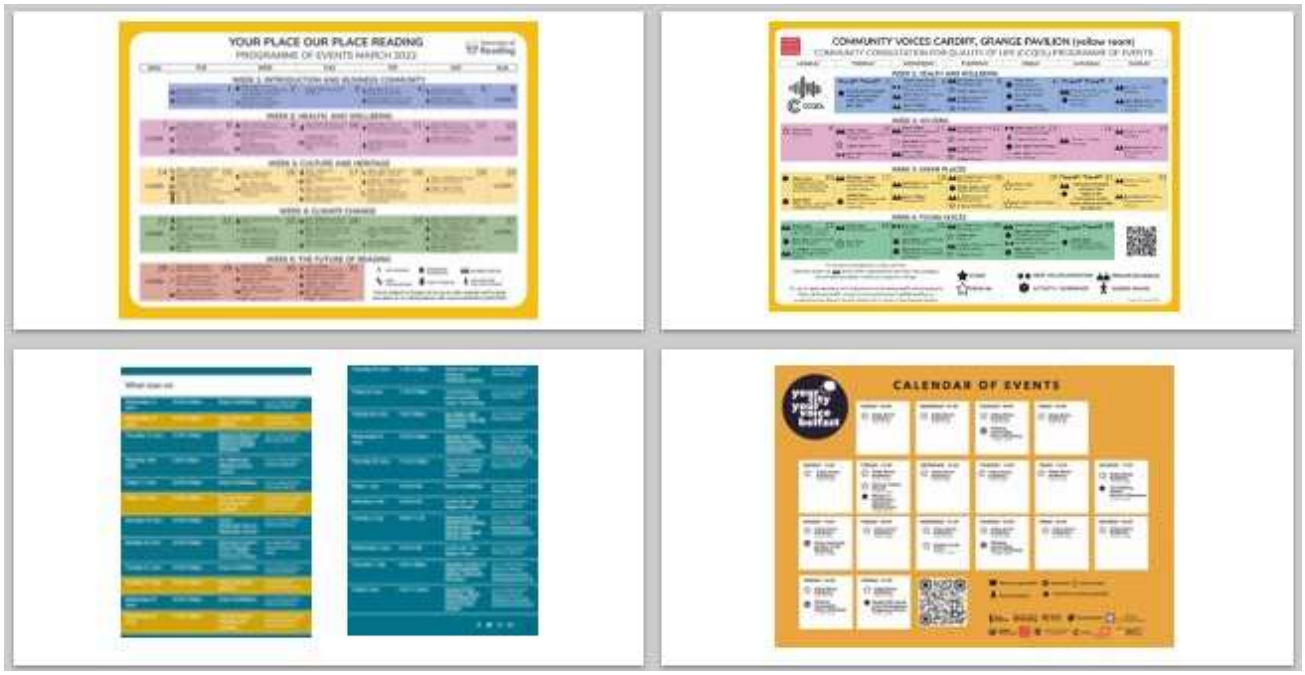


*Figure 70 Programme planning: different sessions in various Urban Rooms*

People participated for multiple reasons, but the highest they scored was “the staff in the urban room” (Figure 11). This further enforces the reason to have inclusive, proactive, trained, and informed staff for the Urban Room. Survey data also highlighted the extent to which knowledge of the urban room was achieved through personal connections.

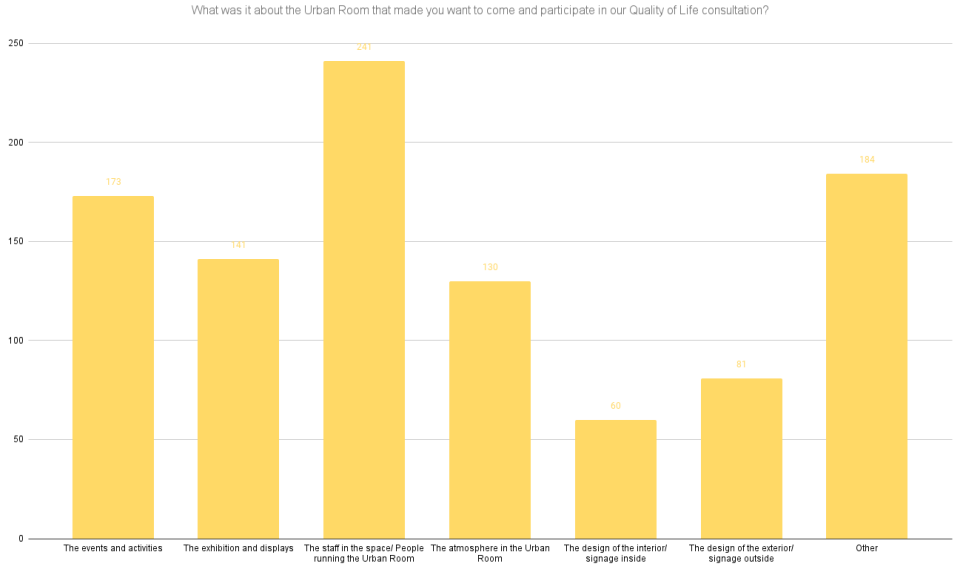


*Figure 11 Reasons for participating in the Urban Room*

The Urban Rooms tested various methods, sessions, and designs. In one instance in the Reading Urban Room, it tested the space for consultation with autistic and neurodiverse groups. In Cardiff room, it tested space for young adults from schools. Belfast room saw workshops with blind and deaf organisations. Edinburgh planned urbans rooms which would reach remote locations with a help of folding banners, stands and tablets. These are described in detail in respective local reports, as well as base of other publications in process. These pilots projects prove that urban rooms are testing grounds for inclusive participatory practices.

## 3.4 Results from Participatory mapping

Reading project website collected 400 pins on the digital map and over 100 participation surveys. Cardiff project website collected 321 pins, with 30 pins being collected from individuals under 18 years of age, and 167 participation surveys. Edinburgh project website collected a total of 475 digital pins and 335 surveys. The Belfast project website collected 197 pins on the map and 270 surveys. The process of collecting these pins helped the team create democratic layered maps of each pilot neighbourhood/ town/ city. We call them places that impact the quality of life as described in the next section.

### 3.4.1 Places that impact on Quality of Life in the neighbourhood

The following passage describes an analysis that was conducted on the pins placed on maps to determine how well the category names matched the intended meaning.

*Table 1 Division of pins in Quality of Life themes*

| | Health | Control | Movement | Belonging | Wonder | Nature |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pins (locations) | 397 | 130 | 344 | 490 | 388 | 505 |

The six Quality of Life themes are Nature, Health, Wonder, Belonging, Movement and Control. A total of 1363 pins were collected with 400 in Reading, 321 in Cardiff, 475 in Edinburgh and 197 in Belfast. A division of the 1363 pins in the 6 QOL framework themes can be seen in Table 2

*Table 2 Percentage breakdown of Pins*

| | Control | Health | Nature | Wonder | Movement | Belonging |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reading | 10% | 30% | 37% | 26% | 22% | 39% |
| Cardiff | 10% | 41% | 51% | 27% | 31% | 40% |
| Edinburgh | 7% | 25% | 35% | 28% | 23% | 28% |
| Belfast | 15% | 21% | 24% | 36% | 29% | 43% |
| UK | 10% | 29% | 37% | 28% | 25% | 36% |

Based on the findings, a pyramid of themes in inverted order (as shown in figure 12) appears to be emerging, with "Nature" being the most important theme at the top, followed by "Belonging" in the second, and "Health" ranked third. Places where people felt a sense of control was at the bottom of the pyramid.

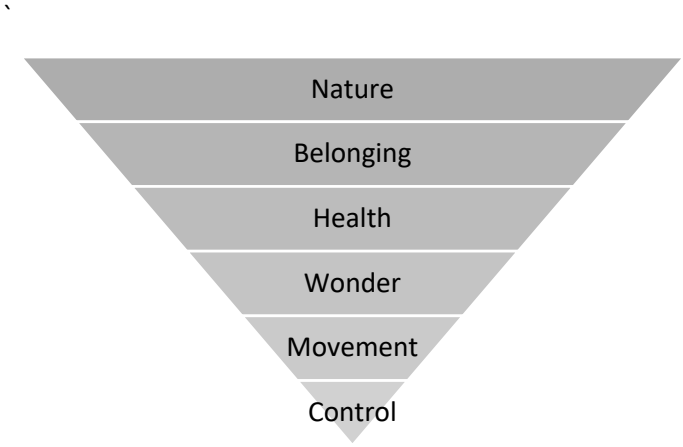


*Figure 12 Inverted pyramid of QOL framework themes*

Although all QOL framework themes are interrelated, some themes received more priority over others. The survey and consultation process indicated that themes whose title reflected clearly positive aspects of a participant's environment were selected. Themes such as 'movement' and 'control' were less demonstrative of positive environments which in itself may have deterred their selection. This was detected through feedback to team members during the survey process. It is likely that people didn't really understand what was meant by the word 'control' or from discussions in the urban room, that it could be perceived negatively as places that impose control. It also can mean that there are not enough places where people feel a sense of agency, safety, or a sense of ownership.

## 3.5 Results from Participation Survey

As described in the section 3.1, the team employed various tools for data collection and analysis on the use and functioning of the urban rooms, which were a mix of quantitative and qualitative tools. There were observational tools such as daily diaries/ reflection written by the team including student ambassadors and a collection of semi-structured interviews with project partners, participants and blogs written by team members. One of the core methods was a participation survey that followed the mapping exercise.

The survey results show that the respondents were well represented in terms of the demographic population, age, and gender participation (figure13)

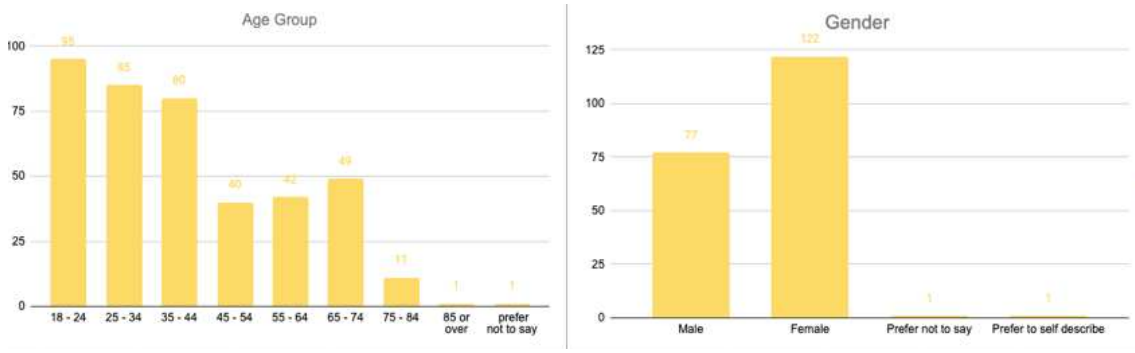


*Figure 13 Demographic data of participants*

Further, the survey identified common learning themes for the research team: the charts and graphs are displayed together in figure 14.

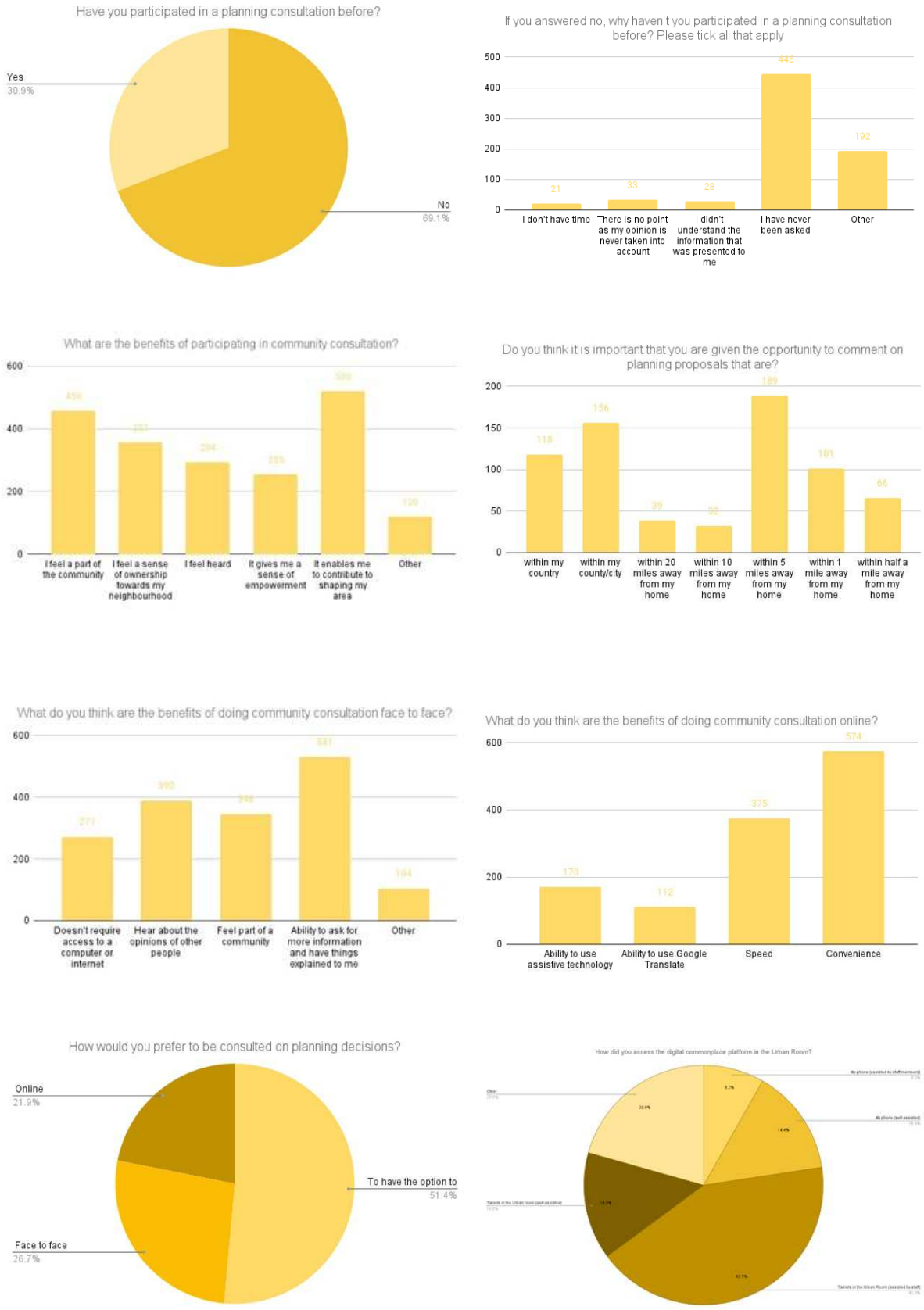


*Figure 14 Charts from Participation Survey*

If control is an element of quality of life, then clearly people had very little control over the planning process. Almost 70% of the people who completed the survey said that they had never participated in a planning consultation before. Out of this group 88% said that they were never asked.

52% of the participants responded that they would like to have the option to participate in consultation either online or face to face depending on what was more convenient. 27% responded that they want to be consulted face to face only and 21% responded that they would like to be consulted online only. When asked about the benefits of participating in community consultation which was a multiple-choice question, the answer "it enables me to contribute to shaping my area" came the highest. Similarly, participants pointed that benefit of doing consultation face to face was "was the ability to ask for more information and have things explained to me", and whereas benefit of doing consultation digitally was "convenience".

70% of the respondents mentioned that they should be allowed to express their opinion on planning in one part of their town even if they lived in another part. To the multiple-choice question on how far should be the boundary to which they should be given an opportunity to comment, the highest response was "within 5 miles away from my home" and followed by "within my county/ city".

## 3.6 Quality of Life delivered through the consultation process

In this section we use evidence collected in the consultation survey, observation tools, and the post urban room processes (semi-structured interviews) to reveal ways in which the consultation itself contributed to the quality of life. The evidence is broken down into relevant themes, once again using the Quality of Life Framework.

*Figure 15 Mapping Process in different Urban rooms*

Through the Participatory Planning GIS mapping features, both physical and digital, the Urban Rooms encouraged people and communities to think about their neighbourhood through the lens of the Quality of Life Framework (Figure 15). Thus, even though it was a data collection exercise, it helped participants learn something about these 6 layers of the framework, and also observe and comment on locations mentioned by others. It was a collective exercise of finding pride and joy in locations in their own neighbourhood, towns, and cities. In Belfast Urban Room, the six QOL framework themes became both a conceptual and physical feature, anchored around six large posters with each term

and definition displayed. Activities were set up to encourage visitors to add their own views on the QOL framework terms, allowing for nuanced local understanding and interpretations to be incorporated into the digital mapping and as central talking points for sessions and workshops.

### 3.6.1 Connecting People/ Social cohesion

The insights (figure 16) are from various interviews done with people who participated in the Urban Rooms. They evidence the value of these spaces for the community. The Urban Rooms offered places for bringing diverse voices together, a space for people who didn't know each other to have a conversation, to exchange skills, and increased opportunities for future collaborations. These spaces acted as catalysts for social cohesion.

| Participant | Quotes |
|---|---|
| | *"I think the way the consultation was done was good in that it really involved the diverse local community who all were able to get an opportunity to voice their opinions on what they liked and what could be improved about the town. This really helps to empower the people in the community and give them ownership as it made them feel valued to have their say and voice their thoughts in such an important consultation which will affect them and their families."* |
| | *"It was good to see different groups represented in the group in the space, so the displays on the walls, the evidence of other groups having met there and done stuff and then through the social media."* |
| | *"Possibly. A chat with a person from Connect Reading, resulted in some further interesting discussions, looping in other local organisations with an interest in sustainability to talk about how we might work better together. It hasn't gone anywhere yet, but it was a start."* |
| | *"We have been put in contact with several other people and organizations: hopefully these links will turn into fruitful collaborations."* |
| | *"New partnership with Reading UK members that has already enabled us to push forward with Incredible Edible concept. Very good dialogue with Reading UK that is leading to new partnerships & hopefully bringing the Incredible Edible Reading concept into RBC policy making"* |
| | *"It was good to see different groups rep- resented in the group in the space, so the displays on the walls, the evidence of other groups having met there and done stuff and then through the social media."* |

*Figure 8 Quotes from participants evidence for Social Cohesion*

Whilst it is difficult to capture this in data, the urban rooms were clearly attractive to people who simply wanted to have a chat, particularly those from the age groups 65 and above. Working through the survey sometimes took as much as an hour and included the participants sharing of memories of place. Many of the age group 75 - 84 we worked with had no email address and were very nervous of the tablets. It was clear that working through the mapping process started to make these people feel a little slightly more digitally enabled.

### 3.6.2 Control

Through the interviews, it was clear that, once inside, people felt comfortable, in the informal atmosphere of the urban rooms and sensed an increase in confidence through their participation. They felt like coming again (thus addressing the problem of lack of repeat participation). Some even started taking ownership of the places and felt a sense of agency in these community spaces. Through the number of pins collected on map, and the section 3.3 analysis it might seem that there is a lack in spaces where people feel a sense of control, the experiences of people in the urban room concludes that people want more of such spaces (figure17).

| Participant | Quotes |
|---|---|
| | *"Every time I came, I really felt that you were encouraging and encouraging and saying how you are grateful for me to be there and be able to help out."* |
| | *"The sessions were led by the CPM, and it really made the women who attended feel supported, valued, and listened to."* |
| | *"I'm feeling grateful, because when I first knew we were doing the urban room I was unsure. But because I showed up and came to see the area, see you or the staff that were working there."* |
| | *"So, I've come out of my comfort zone that have been through quite affecting here, would have been, I'm always in the same area that always in the same building and everybody else knew me."* |

*Figure 9 Quotes from participants evidence for Control*

## 4.0 Conclusion

The paper set out to describe the project Community Consultation for Quality of Life and in doing so explored how the process of community consultation in planning through urban rooms and participatory mapping can enhance the quality of life in neighbourhood, while also helping collect data on the locations that can contribute to individual and communities' quality of life. Having described the research context for the project and the methods that it used, it discussed findings from the mapping exercise, participation survey and experience of urban room that revealed some of the ways in which doing the consultation had impacted on quality of life.

The surveys and urban room data demonstrates that participants were from a range of age groups, that the ethnicities of participants aligned to local area demographics, and that the majority of people who participated had never taken part in planning consultations before. The variety of approaches taken, including urban rooms which hosted events and activities accessible to varied groups in collaboration with local organisation, online platforms which could be accessed individually or with urban room staff support, and consultation teams with a range of experiences in community organising and / or knowledge of existing networks, led to multiple entry points for participation, and demonstrated that inclusive consultation can be achieved. The people of respective neighbourhoods, towns and cities participated overwhelmingly in the project. They felt a sense of control over these urban rooms which led to repeat participation. This sense of control was an amalgamation of increased sense of confidence, sense of ownership towards the space, and a sense of agency to be themselves. Individuals require a place to communicate and occasionally to release their frustrations. These urban rooms provided such an outlet. These rooms were perceived as a venue to interact with others, share information, listen to different perspectives, and experience a sense of belonging. These pilots projects prove that urban rooms are testing grounds for inclusive participatory practices.

The process shows making maps of places that people value with participation from people, at the local neighbourhood level to town level, to city level. Focusing on urban neighbourhoods, it brings out places where people go to escape the "urban". The process is democratic, and open to all. It does not distinguish or alienate. In fact, through forming partnerships, everybody has a vote, and can use it multiple times to drops pins and identify locations that matter to them as an individual, but also as community. Places where people connected with Nature came on top, and where they felt a sense of Belonging was second, followed by places where they went to improve their Health. This highlights the importance of such valued places that improve people's quality of life, especially in the post COVID-19 pandemic.

Whilst the responses and mapping data provided many insights, the fundamental challenge of community engagement, that of reaching and transforming citizens to active participants in their future, requires sustained and well-resourced strategies to build a significant constituency for change. This project provides insight into the tools and techniques to achieve such deep relationships but requires time and the specificity of projects and planning cycles to achieve lasting transformation. It is important to note that the project was delivered just as people were coming out of lockdown from the pandemic, something that may have impacted on their willingness to engage. The pilot projects were open for only one month in each site and hence that hindered long term engagement. Scaling up these processes with an urban room in every neighbourhood for longer term should be seen the next practical stage. This will also allow the urban rooms to acknowledge potential community power dynamics and engage with groups that are less represented.

This research establishes that the methodology developed through urban rooms and participatory mapping can reach a wider demographic of people and can form positive connections and networks. It illustrates the value of capturing information on the places that people value for health and well-being. In reaching a wider demographic, and in demonstrating that people's views on specific places can be captured before any long-term decisions are made, this research offers insights to planning professionals, local and state government, decisionmakers for planning, designing, and implementing services, and placemaking strategies.

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