LEEDS MODEL OF CITIZEN POWER AND ENGAGEMENT REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A shifting social and economic landscape is driving Leeds to transform towards a more resilient, sustainable and inclusive city. This transformation must involve people and Leeds City Council (LCC) has an aspiration to develop Leeds "as a place where local communities **are actively listened** to and included in finding innovative solutions to local challenges" and for Leeds to be "a city where we **shift power to sit with citizens and communities"**. This report adapts the Berkana Institute's Two-Loop Model to analyse the coexistence of two 'systems' in urban governance: a dominant system directing urban change, characterised by stability and order, and an emergent system enacting urban change, comprising a vibrant web of citizens activities.

The dominant system prioritises bureaucratic efficiency through consultation processes aimed at fairness and transparency, but often fails to meaningfully incorporate citizen inputs, thus perpetuating power imbalances and marginalising voices. By contrast, the emergent system, while vibrant and innovative, can suffer from fragmentation and lack of broader impact, as citizens actively participate in matters directly and indirectly affecting their lives but do not significantly influence city-level decisions. It seems unlikely that engagement, where citizens have meaningful involvement, influence and accountability in urban governance, can occur within either system, so the challenge is in navigating the interplay between them and addressing their underlying complexities.

This report presents the findings of workshops exploring experiences of citizen engagement in planning, offering recommendations for how LCC and neighbourhood groups can more effectively engage citizens in urban change. To achieve meaningful engagement, we find that p**ower imbalances, fragmentation and communication barriers** must be addressed. Overcoming power imbalances and communication barriers requires resources to build **knowledge-infrastructure** and **democratic capability**. This involves valuing, mobilising and translating the knowledge generated by citizen research, action and planning. Fragmentation, on the other hand, can be addressed by **enabling and connecting actions, knowledge and plans.** This can share experience, reduce emotional burden and identify cross-area and citywide actions to supplement local action. Ultimately, effective governance should focus as much on **enabling and connnecting citizen action** as it should on **mobilising knowledge** to foster meaningful engagement and drive change. There is a crucial role for **experimentation** both in action and in planning and for making more transparent how citizen action and knowledge is informing urban change earlier in development planning processes.

WORKSHOP DESIGN

We conducted two workshops using creative methods to explore experiences of citizen engagement in development planning from the perspective of neighbourhood groups and of LCC. These focused on structure and knowledge to uncover underlying tensions affecting citizen engagement. A further workshop was held to review and refine the findings of these initial workshops with neighbourhood groups and LCC.

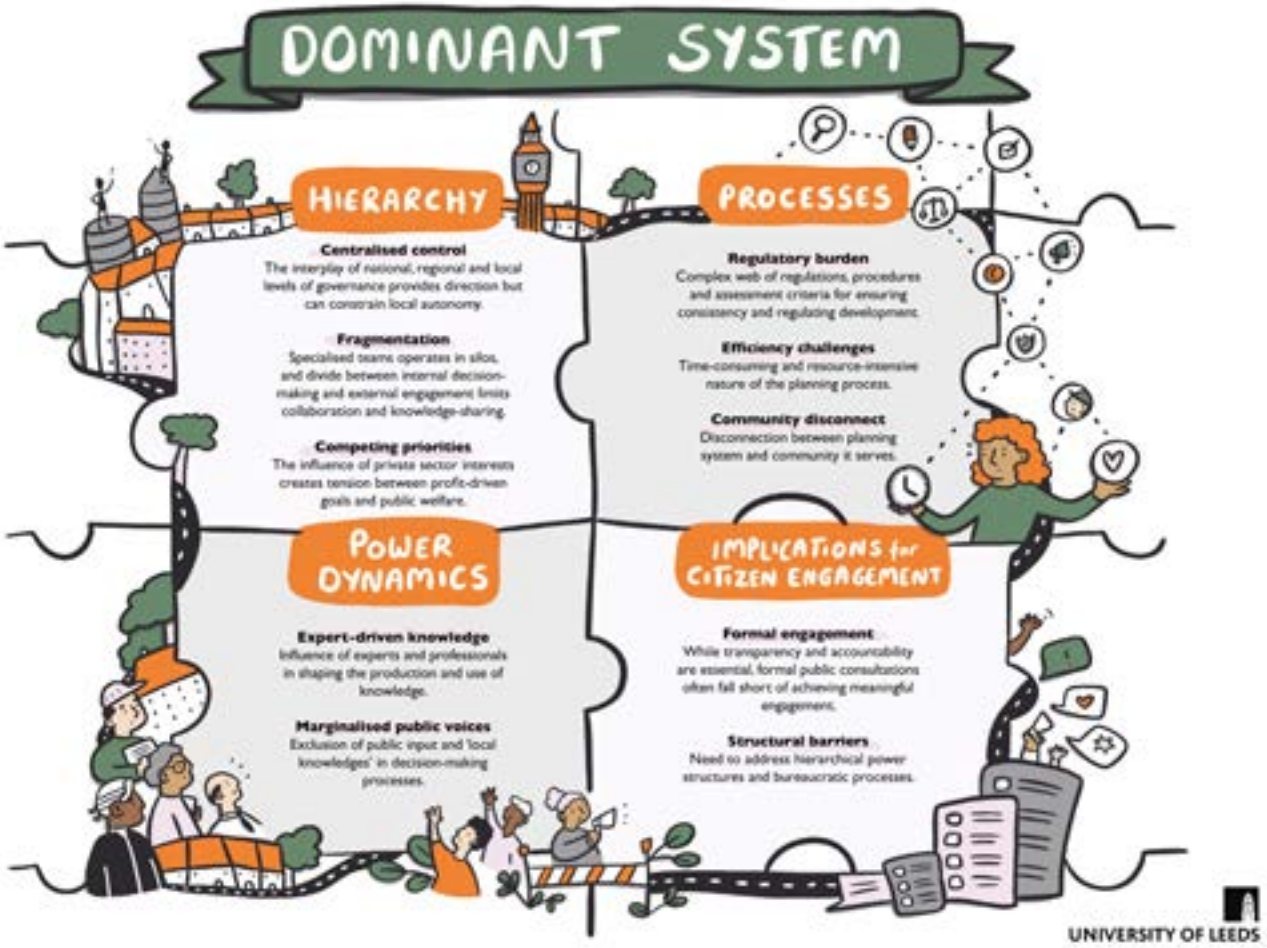
FINDINGS

We analysed workshop insights using the Berkana Institute's Two-Loop Model. This model describes how systems rise, peak and decline, while simultaneously giving rise to new systems. It posits the coexistence of two interrelated ‘loops’ and emphasises the importance of both in driving change: while the ‘dominant loop’ provides stability and order, the ‘emergent loop’ is essential for generating new possibilities.

We briefly outline these systems below before going on to analyse how the interplay between them might be more productively enabled.

DOMINANT SYSTEM

The dominant system of urban change is characterised as a ‘jigsaw’, with each piece of a unique and defined shape contributing to a clear overall image, requiring careful consideration and adherence to established guidelines within a predetermined framework. While this provides structure and transparency, it engages with a **limited range** of knowledge, creates **complex** procedures and processes, and provides little opportunity for **adaptability**. This present challenges for citizen engagement in urban change:



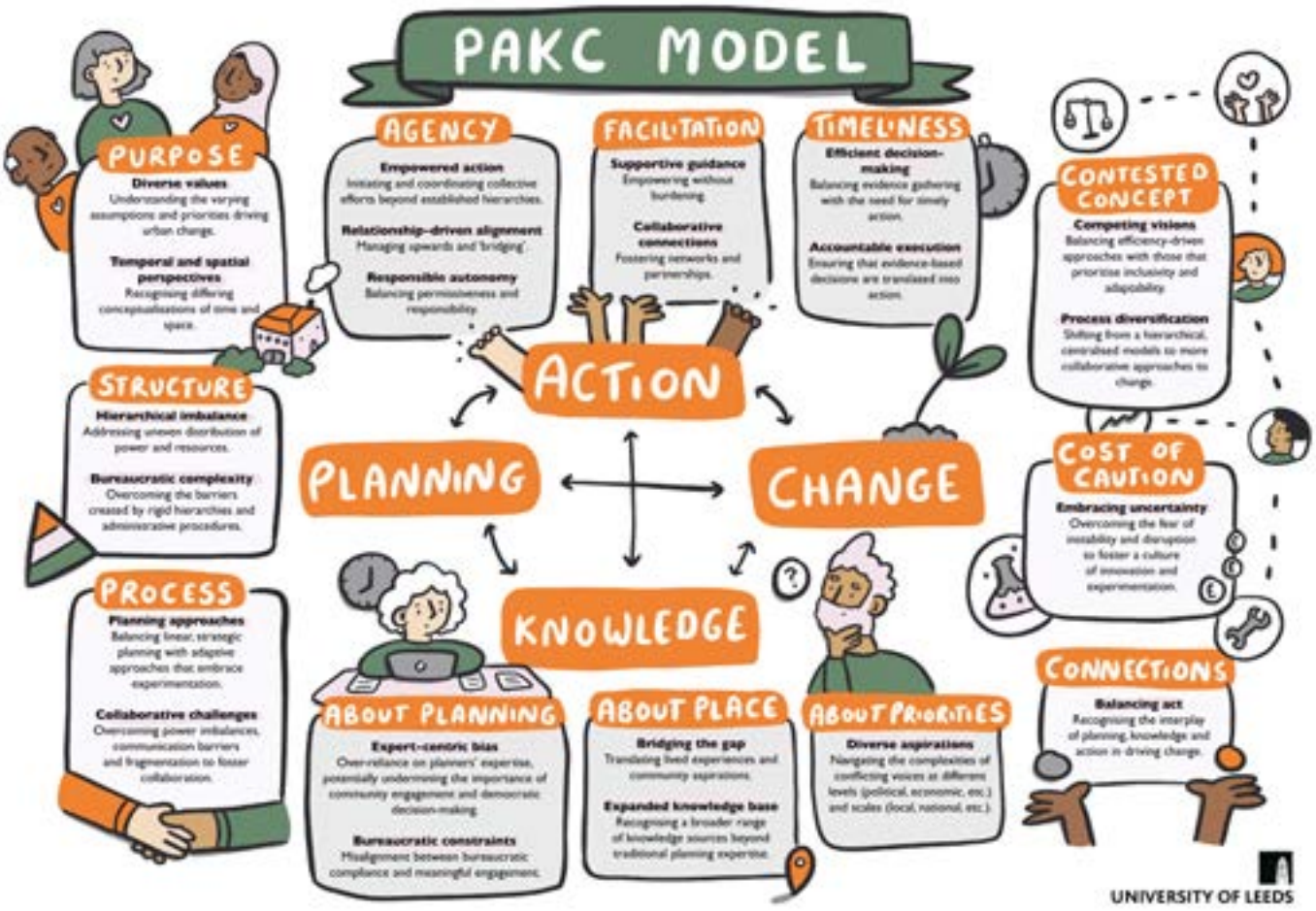
EMERGENT SYSTEM

By contrast, the emergent system is characterised as a ‘patchwork’ of interconnected initiatives and networks working together outside or alongside formal planning structures. The characteristics of the emergent system give more space for experimentation and adaptation, but may suffer from fragmentation and overburden of those involved:

INTERPLAY BETWEEN SYSTEMS

Returning to Leeds' aspiration to be a city where power is shifted to sit with citizens and communities, a more balanced interplay between the dominant and emergent system is needed to enable this. Clearly, there are already interactions: citizen-led groups are feeding into formal planning processes, and there are individuals and organisations acting as **crucial intermediaries**, but interactions are characterised by frustration associated with the complexity and hierarchy of the dominant system, which could lead to disengagement.

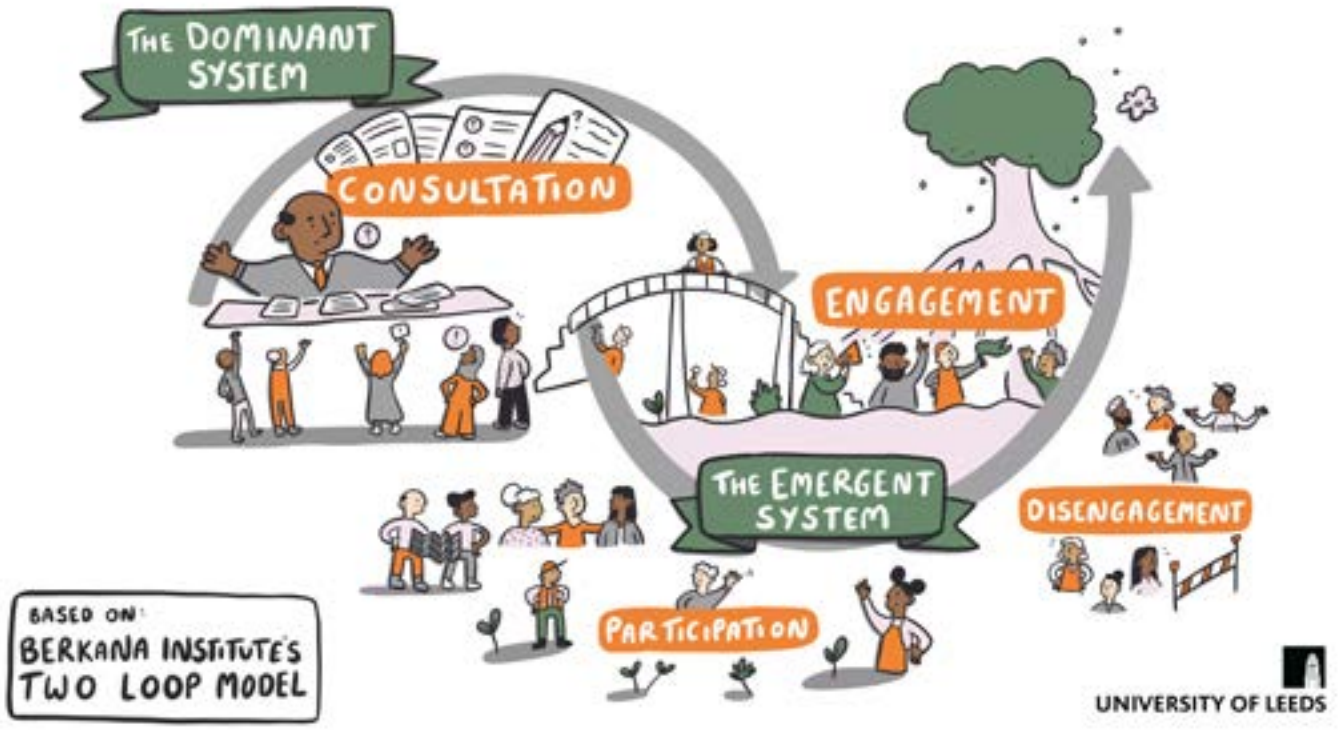
The **Planning-Action-Knowledge-Change (PAKC)** framework emerged from our workshops to support understanding of the possibilities for co-operation and tension between systems. It helps to examine how different visions of urban change are enacted, contested and potentially reconciled.



IMPLICATIONS FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

The disconnect between the systems becomes particularly apparent in relation to citizen engagement: in the dominant system, consultation aims to achieve fairness and transparency but is often a mechanism for fulfilling bureaucratic requirements, gathering opinions but not necessarily acting on them; in the emergent system, citizens actively participate in matters directly and indirectly affecting their lives but do not affect decisions at a city level.

Neither consultation nor participation necessarily translate into engagement, which involves genuine involvement, influence and accountability. To achieve meaningful engagement, power imbalances, fragmentation and communication barriers must be addressed.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Examining urban change through the lens of the Two-loop Model and the PAKC framework helps to identify how to build bridges between the dominant and emergent systems to provide opportunities for meaningful citizen engagement in urban change. We recognise that the planning system, which forms a central role in urban change, is driven by national targets and policies, which are unlikely to change in the near future. However, within those constraints, there is much that LCC and citizens can do to enable citizen-led and LCC-facilitated action and knowledge production, and to connect this action and knowledge to planning in a way that accelerates urban change:

RECOGNISE AND VALUE CITIZEN KNOWLEDGE

Recognise the broad range of neighbourhood and community groups that participate in urban change and seek to engage them in development planning and local action.

- Collect existing knowledge from neighbourhood and community groups as part of Local Plan evidence gathering.
- Move beyond narrow understanding of the value of citizen knowledge and demonstrate its impact on decision making and local action.
- Build capacity to translate knowledge from neighbourhoods and community groups into a format relevant to planning and local action.
- Develop democratic capability and process knowledge to improve citizen understanding of how knowledge is used in decision making.Connect experiments to each other and to broader planning processes.

ENABLE AND CONNECT CITIZEN ACTION AND PLANNING

Connect and support neighbourhood and community groups engaged in knowledge production or action.

- Engage neighbourhood and community groups in translating knowledge.
- Clearly articulate how community and neighbourhood knowledge have informed planning documents to ensure accountability.
- Cultivate an environment for experimentation.

OVERCOME POWER IMBALANCES AND COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

- Where evidence or representation is lacking or where issues are contentious, target engagement activities to those populations or issues.
- When addressing contentious or complex issues, prioritise deliberative engagement whenever possible.
- Build capacity in using creative and experiential methods of engagement.
- Appropriately resource allies and advocates crucial to connecting dominant and emergent systems and to enabling transition between systems.
- Move beyond narrow understanding that citizen engagement is limited to one-off, formal processes designed to reach all citizens.

CONCLUSION

Leeds City Council is committed to actively listening to citizens and shifting power to sit with citizens and communities. This report investigates the realities of citizen engagement in Leeds to gain insights into the challenges and opportunities of citizen engagement, and the potential of creative methods to enhance inclusion and impact. We examined two coexisting systems of urban development – a dominant system prioritising bureaucratic efficiency through consultation aimed at fairness and transparency, and an emergent system which is vibrant and innovative, but fragmented. Both systems are pioneering new ways of working to promote citizen involvement; however, power imbalances, fragmentation and communication barriers present significant obstacles to engagement, where citizens have meaningful involvement, influence and accountability. There are many forces keeping these obstacles in place, including national planning policy and a growth-based ideology, which were described by our participants as the ‘shadowy place’ undermining their efforts. This shadowy place is unlikely to clear in the short-term, but its presence and influence must be acknowledged and accommodated. Ultimately, the interplay between the systems is crucial to build bridges and to **compost unhelpful preceptions** and processes. This requires action in both systems and co-ordination between the two, which is dependent on consistent funding and strong relationships. Action is specifically required to recognise and value citizen knowledge to ensure it influences planning, enable and connect citizen action and planning to reduce fragmentation, and overcome power imbalances and communication barriers by rethinking approaches to involvement.

01

INTRODUCTION

Leeds City Council (LCC) has an aspiration to develop Leeds “as a place where local communities are actively listened to and included in finding innovative solutions to local challenges” and for Leeds to be “a city where we shift power to sit with citizens and communities”. In a context of growing citizen disillusionment, these aspirations are ambitious: a widening disconnect between citizens and their government, marked by frustration at unresponsive policies and a perceived lack of agency, is eroding trust in the democratic process and casting a long shadow over our collective urban future. This erosion of trust is particularly concerning given the rapid pace of urban change and the complex challenges facing the city, from climate change to social inequality.

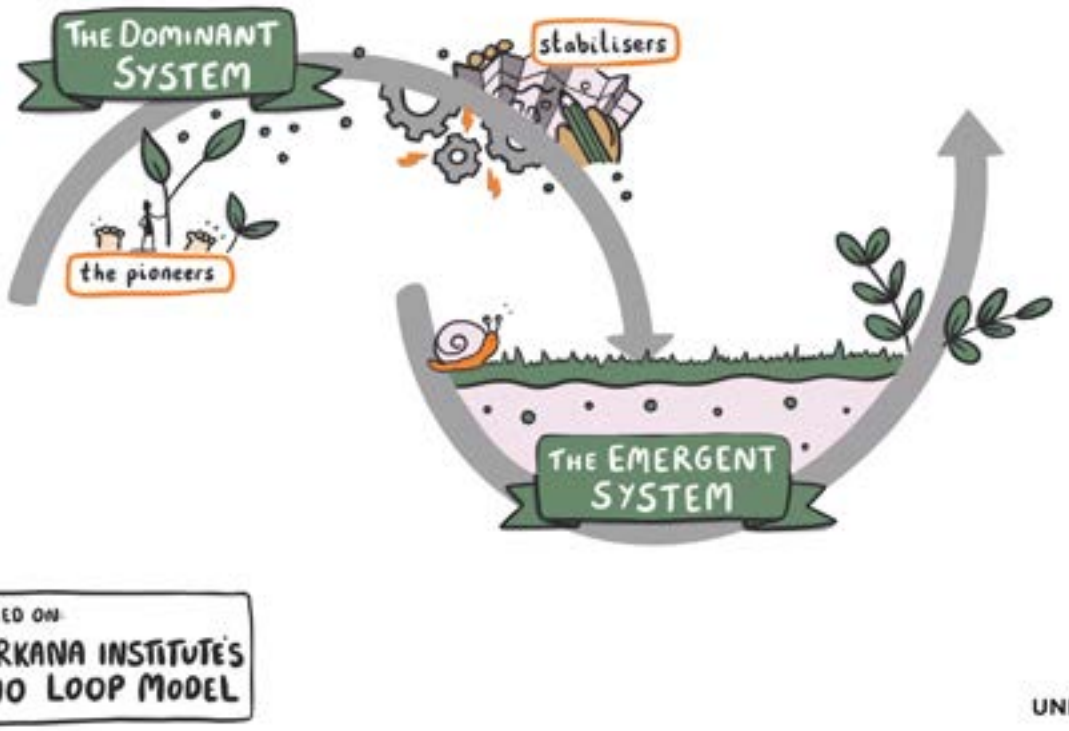
Leeds’ shifting landscape demands a fundamental transformation in how we approach city-building. Creating a resilient, sustainable and inclusive city necessitates more than strategic planning: it demands a profound partnership between citizens, their elected representatives and the civil service. LCC has articulated its commitment to community power and engagement through its Team Leeds Approach. One explicit manifestation of this is its sector-leading Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), which sets out how communities, business and other stakeholders can be involved in the planning process.

However, translating public involvement into meaningful engagement in complex processes of urban change poses significant challenges: LCC has recognised in its ambitions to shift power to sit with citizens that current approaches to citizen engagement are insufficient and innovation is requiredw to address this; yet, despite LCC’s commitment to ensuring accessibility, inclusivity and responsiveness, resource constraints and disconnection with the public means that engagement with some groups and areas of Leeds remains difficult. Consultation on planning documents also remains an adversarial process, with few opportunities to engage with complexity and contestation and with citizen aspirations. The consequences of failing to effectively engage citizens are farreaching, potentially leading to conflict, exacerbating inequalities and hindering the city’s ability to address pressing issues.

In a time characterised by rapid change, increasing uncertainty and declining trust in institutions, how can cities like Leeds effectively engage citizens and fulfil the promise of democratic engagement?

This report seeks to identify and analyse key challenges to effective citizen engagement in Leeds. By examining the experiences of those at the forefront of citizen engagement, we explore how LCC and neighbourhood and community groups can more effectively engage citizens in urban change. Our aim is to provide insights and recommendations for more inclusive and participatory city-building practices in Leeds, ultimately contributing to a more democratic and equitable Leeds.

This report is structured as follows: we start by describing how we examined challenges and identified recommendations for citizen engagement; in section 3 we use the Berkana Institute's Two-Loop Model[1] to analyse the co-existence of two 'systems' in urban governance, and analyse the interplay between them; in section 4 we provide recommendations for how LCC and neighbourhood and community groups can move from consultation and participation towards meaningful engagement by overcoming power imbalances, fragmentation and communication barriers to mobilise knowledge, connect citizen action and enable experimentation; in section 5 we present our conclusions.



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[1] https://berkana.org/resources/pioneering-a-new-paradign/

02
METHODOLOGY

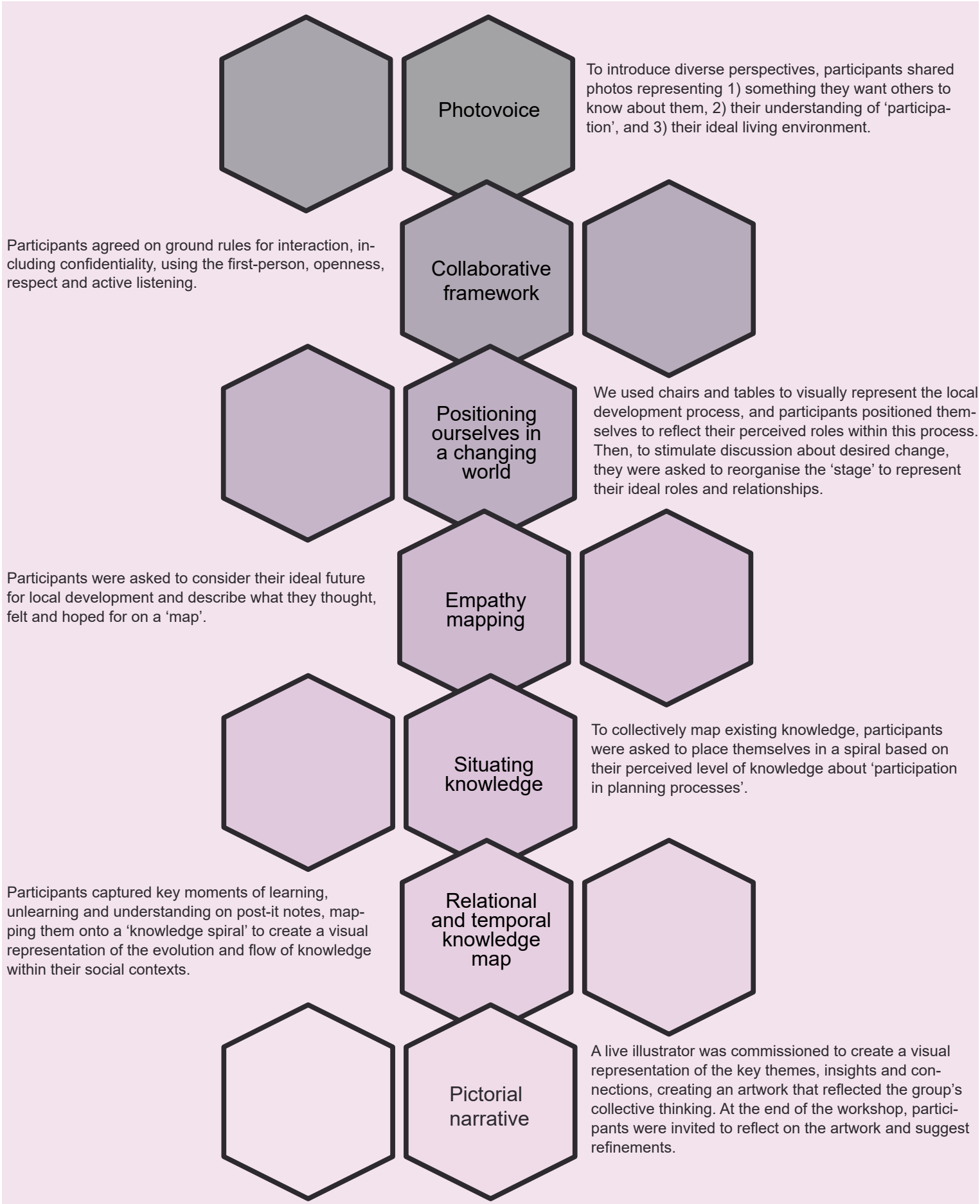
Citizen engagement in local development is a complex and challenging process, often characterised by a range of conflicting perspectives. Rather than trying to simplify this complexity, we wanted to delve into it, exploring emerging tensions and looking for common ground. Leeds, currently in the consultation phase for its Local Plan 2040, provided a rich context to investigate the barriers and opportunities for effective citizen engagement, given the city's rapid urban development.

2.1
INTERACTIVE WORKSHOPS

Two interactive workshops were conducted: one with five members of neighbourhood and community groups (from two Neighbourhood Planning Forums, producing a Neighbourhood Plan, and two community organisations, actively involved in citizen participation in local area development), and another with ten LCC representatives. Participants were separated into two different workshops to manage the inherent power dynamics of local development, and to give space to explore different experiences.

These workshops used a variety of creative engagement techniques to explore participants' experiences of participation in urban development. This included role-playing exercises and storytelling to facilitate participants' exploration of different positions and relationships. These were chosen to access embodied, implicit knowledge that is often obscured by conventional approaches. Thus, the workshops simultaneously allowed for an evaluation of potential application of these creative methods and the gathering of insights into citizen engagement in local development.

Below is a brief description of workshop activities and more detail is provided in Appendix 1:



02.2
REFLECTION ON METHODS

To gather feedback on participants' experience of the workshop and evaluate the relevance of methods to citizen engagement, participants completed online post-workshop questionnaires. Feedback from workshop participants on the creative methods used fell into two broad areas: concern about the lack of specificity of the methods and support for the potential to expose worldviews and assumptions that are rarely talked about.

Concern about the lack of specificity related to both the limited transferability of methods to consultation, and the fear that opening up discussions too broadly could lead to unmeetable public expectations.

The transferability related in part to logistical concerns about implementing methods in larger and more diverse groups, and some suggestions for refinement were suggested. However, it is unlikely that the exact methods deployed would be used in large groups – they are specifically intended to stimulate deliberation, which inherently works better in smaller groups.

There was also concern about the relevance to consultation and asking specific questions about spatial allocations and policy. This concern is valid, and these methods are unlikely to be useful for exploring the very specific issues under examination at the consultation stage. However, at earlier, more exploratory phases of engagement, such as evidence gathering, they may be more relevant.

In relation to opening up discussion too broadly, there was concern about the relevance of the type of questions posed of participants. This again, might relate to the challenging balance between asking very specific questions which reveal precise but limited knowledge, and asking more open questions and having to do more work to interpret and translate the knowledge produced.

There was a parallel concern about having a more open debate and the potential for this to raise expectations of participants when there were so few degrees of freedom in the planning system.

This, again, represents a balance between allowing limited degrees of freedom, thus enabling only superficial discussion, and allowing more freedom, which could lead to more in-depth discussion but be harder to

relate to planning, or which might raise expectations of the change that is possible.

Conversely, many participants noted that the creative and experiential methods enabled participants to talk more frankly and exposed interesting insights about the factors that were holding things in place, which are normally obscured in consultation activities. There was concern that exercises were being interpreted in different ways (particularly the staging exercise) and that this was a problem. However, the differing interpretations revealed a great deal about variations in assumptions and world views and about power dynamics, which are central to urban change, but which are not normally explicitly discussed. Participants found that more experiential and active exercises opened up discussion and allowed participants to reflect on their positionality more than was normally encouraged. This gave richer insights about power dynamics which are not normally revealed. Interestingly, in the less experiential activities, participants tended to drop back into ‘types’ and had more limited scope to entertain new ideas.

Visual representations of participants’ insights through the meeting illustration helped identify patterns, connections and tensions within and between different pieces of knowledge. Participants saw real value of visual representation in communicating complex insights and summarising conversations.

02.3 REFINING RECOMMENDATIONS

A second workshop was held with all participants from previous workshops together along with representatives from Voluntary Action Leeds, who are central to many of the recommendations in this report. This workshop focussed specifically on bridging the gap between the dominant and emergent systems, so it was important for representatives of both systems to contribute to this process. Power dynamics were managed by focussing on experiential knowledge and on highlighting the contribution of change in both systems to citizen engagement. In the first part of this workshop, participants were introduced to the two-loop model developed in this report, after which they articulated their experiences operating within it.

In the second part of the workshop, participants discussed the process of moving from consultation and participation to meaningful engagement and considered whether the initial recommendations would address the challenges they identified when discussing how it felt to operate in their current position. The workshop outputs were used to refine the representation of the two systems and the recommendations in this report.

02.4 LIMITATIONS

The workshops were conducted with a limited range of neighbourhood and community groups and LCC staff, so do not represent the breadth of experiences and activities across the city. This project was intended as the first step towards developing a Leeds Model of Community Power and Engagement and it is recognised that broader engagement is needed to develop a model that represents the experiences of a wider range of groups. We were not able to test the creative methods on a live issue with citizens so are not able to make concrete recommendations about their relevance.

03

FINDINGS: TWO TALES OF ONE CITY

Leeds is a complex and dynamic city with competing priorities, diverse communities and myriad challenges. As such, it requires constant evolution and adaptation.

To understand how the dynamics at play influence citizen engagement in development planning, this report uses the Berkana Institute's Two-Loop Model. This model describes how systems rise, peak and decline, while simultaneously giving rise to new systems. It posits the coexistence of two interrelated 'loops' and emphasises the importance of both in driving change: while the 'dominant loop' provides stability and order, the 'emergent loop' is essential for generating new possibilities. More detail is provided in Appendix 2.

Insights from the workshops revealed a city grappling with tensions between these two loops, highlighting a complex interplay of structures, processes and power dynamics that affect citizen engagement in different ways. Throughout the workshops, these tensions manifested as a conflict between the desire for planned, 'jigsaw' development and the need for a flexible, 'patchwork' approach to urban change.

Our aim is to identify the root causes of the challenges to citizen engagement, by examining the interplay between these loops. Sections 3.1 and 3.2 look at the characteristics and dynamics of the dominant and emergent systems respectively; section 3.3 explores how these systems interact, identifying barriers to citizen engagement and opportunities to move from consultation and participation towards meaningful engagement. We use quotes from workshops (presented in quotation marks " ") to evidence and illustrate our analysis.

03.1

THE DOMINANT ‘JIGSAW’ SYSTEM

From the outset, development planning in Leeds has been a growing field, driven by the city’s rapid industrialisation and urban growth, and has become an essential part of shaping the city’s physical environment.

Over time, as the city has grown in complexity, so has the planning system, which has become increasingly formalised and institutionalised. This growth has gradually expanded to the point where the influence of planning has moved beyond the physical infrastructure to include social and economic development.

While centralisation offers some advantages, such as collaboration on large-scale projects and a clear policy agenda, its concentrated power and entrenched bureaucracy can inhibit LCC’s ability to continually adapt and change in response to new challenges.

This is particularly evident in the context of citizen engagement with planning, where professionalisation has widened the gap between people’s lived experience of places and the technical language and frameworks used in development planning to define what a ‘place’ is (i.e. a set of spatial allocations and development rules). This disconnect increasingly alienated people from technical know-how (‘knowledge about planning’) and reinforced its separation from citizens’ local experience (‘knowledge about place’), making it difficult for them to articulate their aspirations in a way that was consistent with the objectives of the local plan.

Tension arises when trying to reconcile a planned, structured approach to urban development with the growing demand for more flexible and participatory processes for delivering change. Indeed, despite increased efforts by local authorities to consult citizens, the dominant system often prioritises structure and efficiency over inclusivity and responsiveness.

The ‘jigsaw puzzle’ metaphor that emerged from the workshops captures the essence of traditional urban planning: just as each piece of a jigsaw puzzle has a unique shape and position within the completed image, urban development requires careful consideration and adherence to established guidelines within a predetermined framework. The Local Plan, the end-product of this process, governed by established standards and protocols, is like the completed jigsaw, outlining the city’s intended future.

The blueprint for Leeds is being drawn, but who holds the pencil?

03.1.1

COMPLEX PROCESSES

The development planning process in Leeds, and indeed in the UK as a whole, is a complex and often lengthy undertaking that requires a considerable amount of technical expertise and documentation. To navigate this intricate landscape, the dominant planning system has established a formal framework marked by a complex web of regulations, procedures and assessment criteria.

Central to this framework is statutory planning legislation, which establishes a top-down approach with detailed guidelines and requirements for development plans and proposals, providing the overarching legal basis for development. Although essential to ensure consistency and regulate development, such rigid structure may also limit opportunities for creativity and community-driven initiatives.

The Local Plan, a comprehensive blueprint for the city's development, consolidates the formal nature of the planning system. It provides a framework for decision making by setting out specific policies, objectives and design standards, including spatial designations of land use, which can be particularly contentious as they directly affect property values, development opportunities and community character.

The Local Plan is subject to extensive examination and scrutiny prior to adoption to remain relevant and adapt to changing circumstances. This process includes technical appraisal, public consultation with opportunities for direct input and feedback from the public, and scrutiny by planning committees. It also involves an assessment of the plan's impact on various sectors, including housing, infrastructure and the environment.

This scrutiny aims to produce robust and well-considered plans and is therefore critical to strategic planning. However, it can be time consuming and resource-intensive, potentially delaying necessary plan updates and, consequently, the pace of development.

Such delays can create a sense of disconnection between the planning system and the community it serves, leading to frustration for both planning professionals and the public.

This is particularly the case where citizen engagement is limited or tokenistic, and where citizens cannot see the connection between the views they have contributed and the plan that emerges from a scrutiny process, often months or years after their involvement.

This extended process can contribute to citizens feeling that their input is not really taken into account in the final decision-making process.

03.1.2

HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The dominant planning system operates within a formal and hierarchical framework characterised by a complex interplay between national, regional and local governance. The planning process itself involves a web of interactions between council officers, elected representatives and external stakeholders.

National and devolved governments define the overall framework for governance, including policy and legislative agendas that determine the direction of national development, and setting specific standards and targets that local governments must meet to ensure consistency and uniformity across different regions. They also allocate funds to support various initiatives and programmes, often with conditions that influence how the money is spent. These directives, while providing a sense of direction and ensuring that national priorities are addressed, can limit the autonomy of local governments by restricting their ability to make independent decisions, and potentially making them less responsive to the specific needs and preferences of their communities. This layer of governance was described as a “shadowy place” in our workshops, highlighting its pervasive, often unspoken influence on local decisions.

Within LCC, the planning function is spread across several teams, each with a specific set of responsibilities. The Neighbourhood Planning and Engagement Team is tasked with bridging the gap between citizens and planners. It is expected to “sit among people and have conversations” and actively engage with communities. This specialised structure can increase productivity but also lead to fragmentation between teams, as well as communication barriers between internal decision-making and external engagement. Council officers acknowledge that they “spend a lot of time listening to the [decision-making] table”, as the demands of their role often prioritise internal decision-making over external engagement. And although they also recognise the importance of “turn[ing] around and listen[ing] to new voices”, the fact that “it’s easier to listen to people around the table who understand how things work” can lead to a focus on familiar voices and existing knowledge.

In addition to internal organisational structures, external political pressures can pose challenges to inclusive planning for LCC: for example, elected representatives, who are supposed to reflect the diverse interests of the city's population, play a crucial role in shaping the planning agenda; however, their decisions are often influenced by political considerations and electoral pressures, which may not always be in line with the advice of professional planning practitioners. These dynamics often create further tensions, particularly between short-term political gains and long-term planning objectives.

Alongside local governments, the private sector, particularly developers and landowners, is a powerful force in the planning process. Their financial interests can have a significant influence on development patterns, thereby creating a dynamic tension between the pursuit of profit and the public interest. This influence is manifested in a number of ways, including economic clout, expertise and ownership of land. While the planning system aims to balance these competing demands through regulation and policy, the pressure to accommodate growth can sometimes lead to compromises that prioritise economic development over other considerations, tipping the balance in favour of developers.

In contrast to the powerful leverage of the private sector, the public, despite being the ultimate beneficiaries of the built environment, has limited capacity to engage meaningfully in planning decisions. Constraints such as limited time and resources, complex planning language and bureaucratic obstacles (discussed in more detail in 3.1.3 and 3.1.4) often limit their influence.

03.1.3

POWER DYNAMICS AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The complex processes and hierarchies of the planning system creates a tension between the aspiration to engage citizens in the planning process and the practical constraints of meeting deadlines, achieving specific policy objectives and reconciling potentially conflicting interests.

In this landscape, one of the most challenging issues is the power differential between citizens, planning authorities and other powerful actors, including developers and politicians.

Planning authorities have technical expertise, resources and legal powers that can create an uneven playing field. The result of this imbalance is that consultation may offer limited opportunities for meaningful input or influence over final decisions, as these may favour the interests of more powerful stakeholders, such as those associated with political agendas or private development, potentially at the expense of public interests.

Furthermore, even when citizen consultation is conducted in a and inclusive manner, there may be challenges in that ‘local knowledges’ are adequately represented and incorporated into decision-making. The production of itself, another key issue, is also shaped by specific power dynamics: primarily controlled by experts and professionals, planning knowledge is often specialised and inaccessible to the public, creating a knowledge gap that limits their ability to critique planning proposals and participate meaningfully in decisionmaking.

Moreover, the dominance of technical and complex processes reinforces this knowledge in favour of experts, thereby increasing the marginalisation of public input.

It is important to note the wide variation in capacity and perceptions of staff in LCC, as not all staff value citizen knowledge and engagement in the same way. This variation arises as a function of training, worldview, institutional culture or individual experiences and can create additional barriers to engagement.

Finally, the bureaucratic planning framework can further constrain the implementation of engagement initiatives, creating a mismatch between stated commitments to citizen involvement and actual public influence. In particular, the translation of local aspirations into formal planning documents can be challenging for the reasons outlined above, potentially resulting in a loss of nuance and authenticity and creating barriers to effective collaboration. The requirement for extensive documentation can be an additional deterrent to engagement, particularly for marginalised groups or those with limited resources, and the digital divide can limit access to the planning process for certain groups: “You need to be IT literate and to have access to a computer and know what you’re doing. Big companies hope you just give up”.

03.1.4

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN THE DOMINANT SYSTEM

Processes are in place to provide opportunities for citizen involvement in planning decisions. The public is consulted at various stages of the planning process, from development plan formulation to decision, when input is sought from citizens, stakeholders and interest groups on proposed plans and development projects. Central to this process is the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), a formal document that outlines how the public will be involved in planning matters, with an emphasis on transparency and accountability. A series of channels are used to gather public opinion, including public meetings, online platforms and written submissions. In response, planning authorities are required to demonstrate how they have responded to all comments received during the consultation process, and this evidence is usually included in planning reports or decision notices.

However, as shown in the previous three sections, the complexity of processes, the rigid hierarchical structure and the power imbalances of the dominant system place significant constraints on LCC's ability to ensure that citizen voices are heard and integrated into decision-making.

Although citizen engagement is intended to serve multiple purposes, including gathering public input, enhancing the legitimacy of decisionmaking and building trust between public bodies and citizens, the narrow focus on "getting a plan through" can sometimes overshadow its broader aims. Moreover, because "the statutory process [refers to] 'consultation', not '[engagement]'", the emphasis may shift from meaningful involvement to a collection of opinions that are solicited but not acted upon.

This is reinforced by the experiences of citizens within the dominant system, who perceive it as “broken” and express concern about the government’s insistence on development plans:

> “LCC and the government are focussed on individual and development planning (i.e. the Local Plan). The government would like me to do something because this would prove the localism agenda worked, but [I] have no real impact”.

In conclusion, although mechanisms for public involvement exist within the dominant planning system, it is often limited to consultation by power imbalances, knowledge divides and bureaucratic inertia.

These shortcomings are at the root of challenges to meaningful citizen engagement like missing pieces in the planning jigsaw, contributing to the image of an elitist system that is unresponsive to the needs of local communities and unable to foster effective collaboration. This can have a negative impact on the quality of planning outcomes and lead to a perception of the whole process as restrictive and potentially oppressive, yet resistant to change, perpetuating entrenched practices based on outdated assumptions. Simply changing the methods used for citizen involvement is insufficient to address the challenges articulated by participants in our workshop and in the LCC Areas of Research Interest unless there is action to tackle these root causes. Alternative approaches to urban change are emerging that seek to address these root causes and create more meaningful engagement in urban change.

03.2

THE EMERGENT ‘PATCHWORK’ SYSTEM

In the previous section we asked who holds the pencil when the blueprint for Leeds is drawn. But what if multiple blueprints for tomorrow’s Leeds are being written in our neighbourhoods today?

In the midst of the established, formalised planning system, there are countervailing forces working quietly in the background to address local challenges.

This emerging system is characterised by a patchwork of interconnected initiatives and networks working together outside or alongside formal planning structures.

These initiatives have always existed in the background, adapting and challenging prevailing conditions, often with limited resources. At critical times, they emerge and gain strength as awareness grows that a fundamentally different approach is needed.

These initiatives and networks have valuable insights and contributions to make to urban planning, including testing innovative ways of tackling local challenges and making communities more resilient. These experiments, in turn, can provide rich sources of data on local preferences and needs, essential evidence for informed decision-making in the planning process.

Most importantly, by building democratic capacity and helping to create more inclusive and responsive urban planning processes, they can play an important role in rebalancing power dynamics and giving citizens a greater voice in shaping their communities – stitching together a more vibrant urban tapestry.

The patchwork nature of the emergent system can create inconsistencies but also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among citizens. However, these diverse and sometimes fragmented initiatives may struggle to amplify their impact and create a more cohesive force for change without a clear framework for collaboration and support. Addressing the challenges they face, such as limited resources and policy barriers, is essential to unlocking the full potential of the emergent system.

03.2.1

ACTION AND EXPERIMENTATION

The emergent system in Leeds is characterised by a vibrant web of initiatives to enact change that emerge organically from within an urban area. These include community-and group-led research and action and council-led programmes, operating alongside and often in response to the formal planning system.

Community-led initiatives range from small-scale projects addressing local needs and aspirations to larger-scale efforts focusing on city-wide issues. The focus is often on experimentation and adaptation, to respond to rapidly social and economic conditions. Examples charities, such as Hyde Park Source, transformed underused spaces into community hubs social interaction and environmental community centres, such as Woodhouse Community Centre, which provide essential services and support for collective action. In addition to the formally recognised structure of community groups, community activists often take the lead in initiating and driving specific projects.

These groups of citizens are passionate about making a difference in their urban area, raising awareness and mobilising collective action to address local issues, thus fostering a sense of empowerment and collective agency. Examples of such community-led initiatives include community gardens, and community resource centres.

Community-led initiatives have varied motivations with some focussed on specific issues of local renewal and resilience, and others on broader goals of sustainability and urban change. It should not be assumed that all are, or wish to, engage in citywide action, nor that perceptions and values are uniform.

Traditionally associated with top-down planning, LCC actively supports citizen action and experimentation within this emergent system. Through the provision of resources, opportunities and platforms for collaboration, LCC's aim is to empower citizens to take responsibility for their communities and local areas by promoting more inclusive and participatory approaches to urban development, exemplified by initiatives such as Neighbourhood Planning Forums and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) programmes. These initiatives directly challenge the dominant system while actively promoting experimentation: Neighbourhood Planning Forums provide a formally recognised platform for citizens to organise and influence local planning decisions within a legal framework. ABCD focuses on building on the strengths and resources of communities to achieve locally defined goals.

Leeds notably funds the largest ABCD pathfinder model in the UK and currently employs 17 Community Builders with a very open remit to map assets in the community and support ideas from people to bring about the change they want to see. Together, these initiatives help to bridge the gap between formal planning processes and citizen-led action.

Building on these collaborative efforts, intermediary organisations like Voluntary Action Leeds (VAL) are essential in supporting and linking initiatives to foster deeper engagement between communities and citizens. As an infrastructure organisation, VAL offers essential resources, training and networking opportunities to strengthen the capacity of community groups.

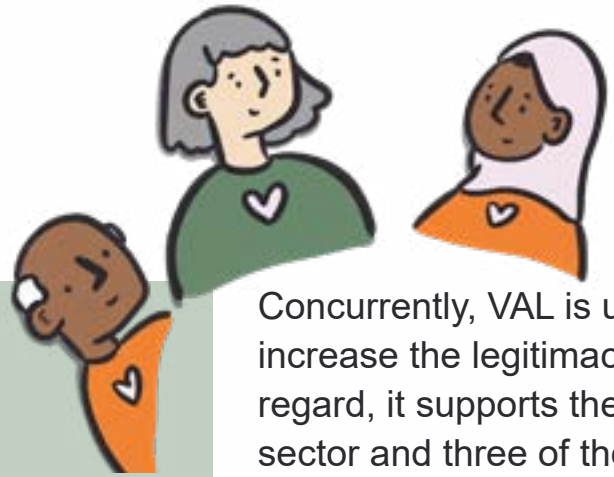
VAL's role in promoting and connecting local action is evident in its support for initiatives such as the Leeds Community Anchors Network (LCAN). LCAN brings together a diverse coalition of community organisations, social enterprises and co-operatives committed to systemic change in the city, fostering an 'ecosystem' of community action. However, while its impact is significant, VAL often struggles with limited resources and therefore requires strategic partnerships. For example, there is potential for synergy with the Leeds Inclusive Anchors Network, which focuses on the role of larger public sector bodies as civic partners. Both networks are committed to improving communities and could draw on their complementary strengths to produce greater impact through shared resources and knowledge; however, the networks currently operate independently.

This intricate network of community-based, council-supported and intermediary organisations forms the basis of a dynamic and evolving system in Leeds. Recognising the value of these alternative approaches, LCC can explore possible ways forward, embracing a model of planning and governance that includes more meaningful engagement.

03.2.2

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Importantly, these engagement efforts extend beyond community-led actions to knowledge production and curation, which stems from the belief that citizens have as much claim to knowledge as planners, policy makers and service providers. These knowledge production activities may be stand alone, such as the LCAN-supported community listening exercise, or might be a by-product of another activity, such as the rich data on aspirations and preferences collected by Neighbourhood Planning Forums in support of neighbourhood plan development. Notably, Neighbourhood Planning Forums have emerged as important platforms for knowledge production and exchange, providing a space for discussion and planning and facilitating the sharing of citizens' experiences, insights and concerns, as well as the technicalities of formal planning processes – acting, in a sense, as channels for "flows of knowledge".



Concurrently, VAL is undertaking an impactful programme of work to increase the legitimacy of community-led knowledge production. In this regard, it supports the Leeds ACTS partnership between the voluntary sector and three of the universities in Leeds, which organises conferences (including a conference in 2024 on housing) and workshops, and administers funding to support collaborations in knowledge production to address key societal challenges within communities across Leeds.

Furthermore, LCAN, which is hosted at VAL, is also involved in developing a Community Research Network (CRN) to support and develop community-led knowledge production, which could include knowledge directly relevant to planning. The CRN ambitions include enabling communities, academics, and policy makers to learn with and from each other.

Health-related initiatives such as the Leeds Health and Care Partnership Leeds People's Voice Partnership[2] and Insights Library[3] further demonstrate the commitment to curating a broader range of knowledge in other sectors in Leeds: the former brings engagement and involvement leads from partner organisations together to share their work to co-ordinate engagement, share knowledge and improve the ways that the health and care partnership hears voices of local people; the latter is a database to collect knowledge from involvement activities taking place in communities across the city to support research and evidence-informed decision-making.

In conclusion, knowledge pertinent to development planning is increasingly being generated by neighbourhood and community groups, and there are nascent initiatives within the health sector to collate this knowledge to help improve health services. However, outside the health sector, knowledge remains fragmented and poorly connected to development planning processes.

2. https://healthwatchleeds.co.uk/our-work/pvp/
3. https://forumcentral.org.uk/leeds-health-and-care-partnership-involvement-library/

03.2.3

BUILDING DEMOCRATIC CAPABILITY

The majority of citizens engage in democratic processes, whether by voting in local and general elections, signing petitions or campaigning with interest groups. However, much of this democratic engagement is relatively superficial. This lack of connection with meaningful change, combined with declining trust in democratic institutions, can lead to disengagement. Community and neighbourhood groups offer an important avenue to build democratic capacity, fostering more meaningful participation in democratic processes that are more likely to lead to change.

The process of navigating complex processes to take action and produce and share knowledge can promote a deeper understanding of local challenges and opportunities, and the capacity to "know enough to communicate with both experts and citizens". This is a crucial skill for fostering collaboration at different levels, empowering citizens to ask critical questions and use their local knowledge to ensure that development initiatives are aligned with community needs and priorities. In this regard, Neighbourhood Planning Forums play a crucial role in organising and facilitating citizen input, particularly where access to information makes it difficult for citizens to understand the opportunities and constraints of local planning:

> *"When we met the developers who had highlighted the fact that the development was within walking distance of Leeds General Infirmary in the marketing spiel, we asked, who would want to walk that way over the bridge [in very poor state]. So, they said that the section 106 could be allocated to bridge improvemen realised that communities could designate section 106 in that way*".

Navigating complex bureaucratic processes (or “trial by bureaucracy”), though often challenging and frustrating, can, under certain conditions, result in valuable ‘process learning’ that significantly enhances an individual’s or group’s ability to engage more effectively with city actors and processes. While citizens may struggle to understand the complexities of the planning system, our workshops revealed that experienced members of neighbourhood and community groups with sustained engagement and access to supportive networks or resources clearly understood the complex balance that LCC was trying to strike and the constrained environment in which they operate: “we had a [Local Plan update] session with the planning department and I got an understanding of the limitations of the planning department and the power of the private sector”.

This suggests that through sustained and supported engagement with the planning process and exposure to the underlying factors influencing decision-making, these groups developed a more nuanced perspective on the challenges and constraints faced by LCC. This included the perception that “their hands are tied” by external influences, particularly those stemming from the “shadowy place” of national planning policy. This heightened awareness seemed, for these experienced groups, to shift the nature of their frustration to a more strategic understanding of the dominant system’s limitations, which prompted them to find ways to either work within or challenge these constraints.

Process learning can thus increase citizens’ democratic capability – their sense of empowerment to influence government systems. An important byproduct of this increased democratic capability is a greater trust in public processes, which could potentially counteract growing citizen disillusionment. However, process learning is often a time consuming and emotionally draining process, as will be discussed in the following section; and if processes are too complex, many citizens may lack the capacity to experiment and engage sufficiently to build this democratic capability, which could, paradoxically, deepen their disillusionment. The balance between process learning and disengagement is indeed precarious.

03.2.4

IMPLICATIONS FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT: EMOTIONAL TOLL, FRAGMENTATION AND THE ILLUSION OF INCLUSIVITY

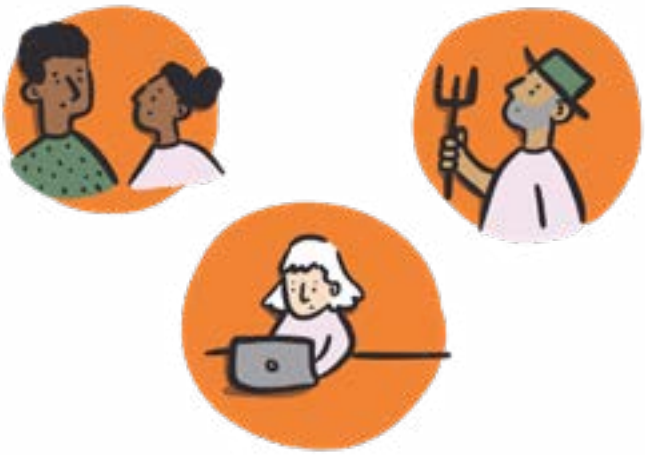
This dynamic and evolving ‘patchwork’ of citizen participation in Leeds is multifaceted and encompasses a wider range of initiatives and approaches than the specific examples discussed here. Indeed, Neighbourhood Planning Forums and community activism, while important, are not the only ways in which citizens get involved in urban change: new practices continue to emerge over time, a testament to the commitment of Leeds and its communities to promoting a more inclusive and responsive urban environment. However, participation in local action and knowledge production does not necessarily equate to meaningful engagement if it is not accompanied by the ability to follow through on commitments, engage in implementation of wider city change and hold decision-makers accountable.

The emergent system aims to promote a more equitable and inclusive approach where active participation is central to its success, but translating this into meaningful engagement can be challenging. In fact, this pursuit often comes at a significant cost, leading to an emotional toll on citizens, fragmentation within communities, and ultimately, the illusion of inclusivity.

The emotional landscape of those involved in emergent systems is complex, often characterised by frustration, anger and marginalisation. These emotions can be a significant barrier to meaningful engagement and scaling up local action, as they can inhibit people's capacity to actively contribute to decision-making processes. As citizens attempt to navigate the complex process that shape their local area, their emotional experiences can evolve, shaped by successes and setbacks: "I wanted to be an expert [in planning] but got overwhelmed with the volume of notifications about planning so stepped back". This illustrates how, without the process learning and increase in democratic capability described in section 3.2.3, the sheer volume and complexity of information can hinder engagement with development planning and, over time, even discourage their participation in more local activities, rather than deepened understanding.

A recurring theme in our workshops is indeed the profound sense of disempowerment and alienation experienced by those engaging with development planning: this feeling often stems from the perceived "limitations of the planning department and the power of the private sector" discussed in 3.2.3; however, in these instances, such perception leads to an erosion of trust in decisionmakers and leaves citizens feeling unheard and undervalued – or, as one participants poignantly expressed, "powerless, upset but resigned – it's just normal to be excluded". This highlights a troubling normalisation of exclusion within the planning process, further entrenching feelings of resignation among the public when their efforts to engage, despite their understanding, consistently meet with perceived lack of impact. Fragmentation within the voluntary sector and between local authorities and the voluntary sector is another significant barrier to meaningful citizen engagement.

Communication and coordination gaps often hamper collaboration between these two groups, despite the common goal of improving community wellbeing and successful examples of collaboration within the voluntary sector (see 3.2.1). This reduces the flow of valuable knowledge about what works (or does not) and thus lessens the impact of experimentation if these lessons can't be shared and built upon. It also limits the development of process learning and democratic capability. The feeling of isolation this fragmentation creates adds to the emotional toll faced by neighbourhood and community groups.



Ineffective communication, particularly when the dissonance of different communication styles hinders citizen engagement, can lead to a disconnect between authorities and the public:

> *“Speaking a lot of different ‘languages’ [in forms and registers] means we have to become experts in that language to make our knowledge relevant”.*

This gap is further exacerbated by the formal language used in official communications, filled with technical jargon and “legal weasel words”, which makes it difficult for citizens to understand and participate in the decision-making process. Additionally, the rich knowledge produced and curated by the third sector remains underutilised, in part because its format or language does not align with the technocratic requirements of the planning system. This was described by workshop participants as a “waste of resources”, when considerable effort goes into gathering knowledge that is then either not used or applied for specific purposes, missing opportunities to inform a wider range of issues. This can lead to a lack of shared understanding of community needs and priorities, which in turn can hinder the sharing of resources and the ability of citizen input to influence decision-making processes.

Underlying all these challenges is, again, a pervasive power imbalance, with significant differences between citizens and decisionmakers reinforcing existing baarriers. This imbalance can make it difficult for people to have their voices heard or their efforts taken seriously when they recognise that certain aspects of the dominant system may be ineffective, unjust or out of touch with public needs, and want to challenge or innovate them.

While citizen participation can be a powerful tool for democratic governance, it is crucial to recognise that it is not a panacea for equitable urban change. In particular, the assumption that it always leads to more equitable outcomes may be overstated, as inherent challenges often undermine its inclusivity and effectiveness.

Even when initiatives are community-led, the emergent system faces challenges with loud, dissenting voices, raising hope for a more representative system where the “loudest voices do not steer decisions”. Indeed, while community-led activities aim to ensure every voice is heard, some groups are better positioned to participate actively in urban change efforts – in particular, those who are more articulate, confident or have greater resources are often better equipped to participate effectively.

Conversely, marginalised groups, or simply those who are quieter and less assertive, may face significant barriers to participation, and their voices may go unheard. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that communityled actions and knowledge production are inherently more inclusive, and work is still needed to widen participation and ensure that this participation genuinely influences city-scale decision-making.

03.3

INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE TWO SYSTEMS

The previous sections have described the dominant and emergent systems in Leeds. While these systems often operate in parallel, their interactions are complex and dynamic, characterised by both cooperation and tension. Exploring the interplay between the two systems will help us to understand how to rebalance power and move from consultation to engagement in the dominant system, and from participation to engagement in the emergent system.

Emerging from our workshop discussions, the PAKC model provides a useful lens through which to analyse this interplay. This model stresses the interconnectedness of its components (Planning, Action, Knowledge and Change) and the importance of balance between them to move from consultation and participation to meaningful engagement. At the same time, it recognises that the interpretation and prioritisation of these components can vary considerably between different actors, with consequent implications for the direction of urban development.

While sections 3.1 and 3.2 raised questions about who holds the pencil in shaping the vision for Leeds, and whether multiple blueprints are simultaneously being drawn, this section builds on the PAKC model to examine how these different visions are enacted, contested and potentially reconciled, and explores the challenges and opportunities that arise from their coexistence. This provides a foundation from which to navigate a productive way forward to meaningful citizen engagement in urban change.

03.3.1

PLANNING

The planning process is crucial in determining where urban development wants to go and how it will get there. It involves a complex interplay of actors, including government agencies, community groups, developers and individuals, where the underlying power dynamics can significantly influence the outcomes of planning efforts.

This subsection highlights the tensions and contradictions that arise from the interaction between dominant and emergent systems by exploring the planning process as a convergence of purpose, structure and process.

Planning as a Purpose

In the dominant system, development planning is seen as a strategic tool for achieving pre-determined goals and objectives. This approach is concerned with aligning policies and allocation of space with an overarching vision for the city that will guide its growth and development within a particular local government area.

Underlying this approach are deeply held values and assumptions. Specifically, the dominant system places a strong emphasis on efficiency, professional expertise and the role of the market in driving progress, reflected in its focus on attracting investment and creating jobs. Such an ethos can sway political support in favour of developers' interests and significantly influence development plans towards objectives that prioritise profit over the public good. As a result, citizens may perceive that their interests are being marginalised, which can undermine public trust in the dominant system.

The consequences of this value system are particularly evident in the realm of public consultation: this often operates as a one-way communication channel, where citizens are primarily informed about proposed developments and asked to comment, but have limited opportunities to engage meaningfully in the decision-making process. While there have been efforts to increase citizen involvement, as evidenced by "a restructure of strategic planning to reflect the roles needed for community engagement", these often feel superficial ("it's not clear how much of this is 'box ticking'") and do not affect the extent to which public input is considered or valued.

In contrast, the emergent system of alternative voices and aspirations recognises the importance of collective action and citizen empowerment. It assumes that citizens possess a "constellation of skills and knowledges" that enables them to shape their own urban environment and emphasises the importance of their input in creating sustainable and equitable cities. This approach emphasises the need for more participatory planning to promote cooperation between citizens and decision-makers but has limited scalability in the current system.

The tension between the dominant and emergent systems is also evident in their different conceptions of time and space: the dominant system tends to give priority to long-term, large-scale planning, often with a focus on infrastructure and economic development; the emergent system, on the other hand, often operates in shorter time frames, addressing immediate needs and local priorities. This clash of visions can lead to conflict and misalignment, fostering a sense of disconnect between overarching development planning objectives and local needs: "there is no connection between areas – huge investment in the city centre, but how should we [citizens] get there? There may be a long-term plan, but we can't see it".

While the emergent system may prioritise short-term results and quick fixes, this is not necessarily at odds with long-term sustainability. Rather, it reflects dissatisfaction with the slow pace of implementation of proposed solutions: "LCC haven't adopted quick fixes (e.g., interactive map of active travel problem sites) – lots of [consultation] but no responses". Despite the desire for more participatory planning, the actual implementation of citizen-led initiatives can be challenging within the dominant system paradigm.

Planning as a Structure

The tension between the dominant and emergent systems in urban development is characterised by a fundamental difference in structure: the former is hierarchical and centralised, while the latter strives for decentralisation and active participation. This structural discrepancy leads to challenges in balancing efficiency, flexibility and collaboration.

The dominant system, with its established institutions and bureaucratic procedures, is structured around a formal, hierarchical approach that has efficiency, order and consistency as priorities. This system places emphasis on standardised policies and risk mitigation strategies, which contribute to a “comfortable and supportive” sense of stability and control for elected officials and professional planners “sitting at the decision-making table”. However, this also “comes at the risk that [planning authorities] don’t stray outside”, leading to a disconnect between citizens and decision-makers, as the focus on formal procedures can limit opportunities for innovative or experimental approaches. The dominant system can thus be perceived as restrictive by both council officials and citizens operating within the emergent system.

While its formal procedures and regulations are intended to ensure fairness and transparency, they can also act as (unintended) barriers to meaningful engagement. Similarly, its top-down decision-making model, while often touted as efficient, can be slow and ineffective, as complex hierarchies and bureaucratic procedures can delay decisions and frustrate stakeholders. For example, the legal requirements on LCC to respond to public comments, while important in terms of accountability, may become burdensome and purely bureaucratic. As a result, despite recognising the importance of public input (“the public must be able to oppose – otherwise they feel disconnected”), the fear of delays and increased costs due to objections (“plans are expensive and even just one objector can lead to delays”) can lead to a riskaverse culture where “box-ticking” exercises can take precedence over substantive dialogue. Uncertainty about the outcome of consultations can further exacerbate these issues, contributing to a reactive rather than proactive approach and creating a sense of unpredictability (“consultations: you can never really predict what is going to happen”) that can divert resources away from engagement activities.

Citizens also face challenges in navigating this complex planning system: while there is a growing expectation for greater public involvement in decision-making processes, bureaucratic hurdles often overshadow the dynamic and evolving nature of urban life, hindering meaningful engagement. “The complexity of planning processes that need to be followed” often creates a barrier between citizens and council officers, making it difficult to understand and engage with the dominant system: “it’s really complicated and I’m not sure where I fit. I’m very supportive [of others’ work], so recognise effort, but not able to help”. This can lead to feelings of disengagement and perceptions that the council is distant or unresponsive to public needs.

Most importantly, power dynamics run through this structure. The dominant system typically places power in the hands of a centralised authority (be it a governmental organisation, a private developer or a combination of both) that exercises significant control over planning and implementing urban projects. As discussed earlier, this concentration of power, illustrated by the question of ‘who holds the pencil’ in urban development, can result in inefficient planning processes and a lack of meaningful citizen engagement: “breaking down barriers and talking to all people is too difficult when facing in at a table with a hierarchy”.

Conversely, the emergent system often exhibits a more distributed pattern of power, with decision-making being shared among community members. This approach aims to empower citizens by making them feel more directly involved in shaping their local environment. However, it can also present challenges in terms of coordination and integration, as different interests and priorities can conflict, making it difficult to move projects forward. In particular, LCC’s planning team is faced with the challenging task of “understand[ing] how to bring together different perspectives, but not everybody will be happy”. This illustrates the inherent tension between wanting to involve different stakeholders and the practical challenges of managing conflicting interests and priorities.

Despite these challenges, the emergent system offers opportunities for greater inclusivity and democratic engagement. In fact, the involvement of citizens in the planning process can help prevent the concentration of power in the hands of a few individuals or groups, which can lead to the corrosion of relationships and the disregard of local needs and preferences.

Planning as a Process

The contrast between the dominant and emergent systems in terms of their approaches to planning extends beyond purpose and structure to include divergent conceptions of the planning process itself.

The dominant system favours a linear and sequential model, characterised by a series of predetermined steps and stages. It relies on extensive evidence gathering, scrutiny and compliance, with local plans as the cornerstone. Rather than being static documents, the plans are designed to provide a clear and comprehensive roadmap for the development of the city, setting out the long-term vision, goals, objectives, policies and strategies to guide decision-making and resource allocation. In other words, these plans provide, in principle, a structured framework for a systematic approach to urban development. However, their standardised and prescriptive nature can also be a source of inflexibility and an obstacle to adaptation to changing conditions and unexpected challenges. Additionally, this approach can sometimes lead to a narrow view of urban change that prioritises economic development over other social, cultural or environmental concerns.

In contrast, the emergent system adopts a more organic model ofurban change, with an emphasis on community participation, adaptiveplanning and collective learning. This is exemplified by the work ofcommunity activists, organisations such as Voluntary Action Leeds, andthe ABCD programme which seeks to empower local residents to playan active role in shaping their neighbourhoods and their city.

While the emergent system aims to build a sense of ownership and commitment within communities, it may lack the kind of comprehensive, long-term vision and strategic planning often associated with the dominant system. This can lead to a more reactive approach to urban development, where decisions are made on the basis of immediate needs and pressures, rather than through a carefully considered plan for the future. This reflects the fact that LCC is struggling to find “easy ways to engage the public in difficult conversations”, which require sustained, coordinated action over time. This means that unless dominant and emergent systems find a way to work together effectively and equally, meaningful engagement in urban planning may not be possible.

In some instances, hybrid approaches attempt to combine elements of both systems, with local authorities and community groups joining forces to work collaboratively, as in the case of the Neighbourhood Planning Forums described above. These partnerships between local authorities and community groups aim to bring together diverse perspectives and create a more inclusive and democratic planning process. However, as already discussed, power imbalances, bureaucratic language of official communication modes, and fragmentation both within and between the voluntary sector and local authorities can hinder engagement. Added to this, the emotional strains involved in the interaction between the two systems can widen this divide.

Ultimately, specific contexts, values and goals may determine the choice between the approach of the dominant system and that of the emergent system. More responsive and inclusive planning strategies for particular communities are likely to combine elements of both systems, tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of those communities.

03.3.2

ACTION

Having established the need for transparency and honest dialogue, we now turn to the practical question of how to translate these ideals into concrete action. In this sub-section, the focus is shifted to the practical difficulties of trying to bridge the gap between the dominant and emergent systems' approaches to enacting change. In particular, it examines the challenges of reconciling permissiveness with responsibility, accountability with adaptability, and action with timeliness and feasibility.

A Quest for Agency: Permissiveness and Responsibility

At the heart of the emergent system is the concept of agency – the ability of individuals or groups to act independently and make choices and decisions to affect their world. This agency manifests itself in a variety of ways, from individual actions to collective efforts, and is particularly relevant to urban development, where it signifies the ability of citizens to shape their city.

Recognising the limitations of the dominant system, many citizens and communities are exercising their agency by challenging the status quo and exploring alternatives. Often operating on the margins of formal structures, these ‘pioneers’ are taking matters into their own hands, experimenting with new ideas, building networks and mobilising communities to drive change. This proactive approach can foster a commitment to civic engagement and empower communities to take ownership of their local development: statements such as “I have to get closer to the table [of decision-making] to push development of an area” or “it's my problem if I don't join the discussion [about local development], even if I don't like the terms of discussion” highlight a sense of responsibility to engage in local decision-making processes, even if they disagree with the parameters set.

However, agency extends beyond individual or collective action to encompass the broader conditions that enable and facilitate it. Those who take responsibility for “recording views and conveying them to the ‘system’” often find themselves in “very demanding position[s]” where their efforts can be met with frustration and disillusionment: “it is a pivot to dissatisfy both ends [planners and the community]”. This illustrates the difficulty of reconciling the aspirations of communities with the realities of institutions, creating a sense of being in a ‘transitional space’ where connections can be difficult to make and maintain. The expression “trial by bureaucracy” further characterises the paradoxical experience of community groups navigating this ‘transitional space’, where they must balance the potential to build relationships with decision-makers (“it builds trust with local officers if you stick around long enough”) with the significant costs in time, energy and frustration that this often entails. This role of bridging between the community and LCC is crucial but currently very challenging.

In this context, the ability of the emergent system to gain traction depends on a delicate balance between permissiveness and responsibility: while a supportive environment that encourages empowerment and experimentation is crucial ("people do not realise what they are allowed to do and LCC misses a trick by not enabling more to act"), individuals and communities also need to "persist" and take ownership of their actions ("there comes a point when you just need to get on and do it in defiance of the council"). In other words, both top-down support and bottom-up responsibility are needed to create a more dynamic and responsive urban environment. But how can this balance be achieved? A different approach to this undertaking might involve a shift in the roles of all those involved in the process of urban development, from planners to community members.

From Local Authorities to 'Local Facilitators'

The workshops revealed a strong demand for a fundamental change in the role of the LCC: community members argued for a move away from LCC as the sole arbiter of good planning to a more facilitative role, empowering communities to take the lead in shaping the development of their own neighbourhoods. This does not mean handing over all responsibility to communities, but rather a shift in the power dynamic, with council officers – and planners in particular – providing support, resources and guidance, while communities are empowered to make decisions and take action.

However, there are several reasons why this shift may be challenging: firstly, entrenched power structures and working practices can resist change, as discussed in 3.1; furthermore, citizens and community groups may not have the capacity, resources or confidence to take on a more active role in planning, as described in 3.2; and finally, large-scale projects often involve multiple stakeholders with different interests, which can be difficult to coordinate to reach consensus.

Faced with these challenges, our workshops sought to explore possible alternatives. Discussions led to the visualisation of decision-making as a dynamic process involving multiple, interconnected circles of different sizes, in which people can “come in and out” and participate in different conversations. Where “there is a crossover between geographical areas and common causes (for example, between back-to-backs or deprived areas)”, larger circles may form, cutting across “invisible lines on the map” to include multiple stakeholders and ensure coordination and cooperation. However, “if the circle is too big, you can’t focus on making decisions and taking action”. It was therefore suggested that a more productive approach might be to organise into smaller, more focused circles while maintaining connections between them to avoid fragmentation and ensure that the needs of the whole community are considered.

While the visual metaphor of interconnected circles emphasised the equality of power between these circles and was widely accepted, the presence or absence of a ‘table’ – interpreted as symbolising “structure and leadership” – sparked debate: those in favour emphasised the practical need for effective leadership, arguing that “leadership is necessary for success in community groups”; conversely, opponents were not necessarily critical of leadership, but they insisted that such leadership should not be hierarchical or authoritarian in its approach; instead, it should focus on empowering citizens and responding to the needs of the communities it serves. Balancing these perspectives requires intermediary structures that can facilitate collaboration and connections. Going back to the first point, LCC could play a crucial role as “an enabler of connections”, fostering a thriving ecosystem of networks and partnerships. This is particularly important where “there are pots of money for different aspects of improvement, [but] it’s difficult to connect them”.

Action, Timeliness and Feasibility

While there appears to be a need for a shift in roles and responsibilities between LCC and communities, it is also important to consider the practical challenges associated with implementing this shift. In this regard, our workshops highlighted the importance of striking a balance between the demand for action, the need for timely implementation and the practical constraints of feasibility.

Action is often driven by a perceived need for change, arising from issues such as inadequate infrastructure, environmental concerns or social inequalities. Such perceptions may give rise to calls for greater citizen engagement in the planning process, whether this is in a 'dominant system' approach (i.e. communities input incorporated within existing structures and processes) or in an 'emergent system' approach (i.e. community-led projects and collaborative partnerships). However, our workshops showed that getting involved can be challenging and frustrating: community members sometimes perceived LCC as simply exploiting their involvement ("Councillors get political capacity by 'playing' with community activity"), while council officers expressed concern about the difficulty of turning conceptual plans into actionable initiatives ("Planning is very conceptual – it's difficult to make it practical, actionable and relevant to people").

Moreover, the process of gathering the evidence needed to make informed decisions can be problematic and time-consuming. Although "knowing about the 'right things'" is crucial for effective planning, limited resources, conflicting perspectives and difficulties in ensuring representative involvement can hinder the collection of relevant data, as discussed above. Furthermore, as it is crucial to ensure "action from knowledge that is collected", the question of "how [planners] are going to use that evidence" is equally important.

Moreover, the practical constraints of feasibility often limit the ability to implement desired actions in a timely manner and ensure that proposed actions are realistic and achievable. These constraints can include financial limitations, regulatory requirements and community support, which can significantly impact the scope and pace of implementation.

The dissonance between knowledge, planning and action was a particular source of frustration for workshop participants: the significant period of time between consultation on plans, production of plans and any discernible action can reduce trust that LCC are responding to consultations and result in citizen disengagement. As discussed previously, plan-making is a complex and highly regulated process and can also be very lengthy. If this is the only process through which citizens see a connection between their engagement and action, it is unlikely that the trend to disengagement will be addressed.

To address these challenges, workshop participants argued for the need to "balance action, timeliness and feasibility" by producing "'good enough' knowledge to act on". This means that reconciling these three elements requires a careful balance between the need for information, planning and the imperative to act. Participants recognised the need for long-term planning and action but highlighted an urgent need to provide opportunities for short-term action – describing this as having both "perennial and annual crops to balance inputs and outcomes". This would demonstrate that LCC were listening to citizen concerns raised through the many consultation processes and to provide new opportunities for citizen participation. Crucially, it would demonstrate "strategic alignment of knowledge and participation" and show how citizen knowledge and planning were contributing to action and change and therefore meaningful engagement.

03.3.3

KNOWLEDGE

The intricate interplay between urban planning and citizen engagement is a complex terrain, fraught with tensions arising from the divergence between professionals with specialised expertise and communities with lived experience navigate the challenges of shaping shared urban spaces. This subsection explores the multifaceted nature of knowledge in this context, looking at the role of expert knowledge and citizen knowledge, and the challenges involved in bridging these perspectives.

Three dimensions of knowledge are considered: ‘knowledge about planning’, which covers the role of experts in urban planning and the importance of fostering open dialogue and two-way communication to ensure meaningful citizen engagement; ‘knowledge about place’, which includes the unique expertise that communities have in understanding their own environment, and the challenges of translating this knowledge into formal planning processes; and ‘knowledge about priorities’, which encompasses the complexities of managing multiple and often conflicting expectations in urban planning.

Knowledge About Planning: ‘The Cult of Expert’

The push for urban change can create tensions between professionals and citizens: while the former often assert their authority by defending their expertise, the latter may feel that “the ‘cult of the expert’ causes neighbourhood groups to doubt their [own] expertise”, knowledge and contributions. Indeed, this tendency to favour expert opinion can be a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, experts bring valuable technical knowledge and experience to the planning process. Advocates of expert-led development may argue that decisions made by those with in-depth knowledge are more efficient because citizens often lack the knowledge to make informed decisions (“it’s easier to listen to people around the [decision-making] table – who understand how things work”), are parochial in their interests (“[I am] hearing conversations with the public – trying to pull out the thread of what people really mean, not what they feel”) and are likely to overlook concerns.

However, this deep-rooted belief in the superior knowledge and professional skills risks overshadowing the importance of citizen engagement and democratic decision-making in shaping the city. Planners, for example, may position themselves as the arbiters of good urban design (“Ideally, planners sit on the table [of decision-making]”), arguing that their expertise qualifies them to “know how places can work better” and therefore to “educate people on what could work better”. Such a stance implies a knowledge hierarchy in which the public is seen primarily as a passive recipient of expert knowledge rather than as a co-creator of the city. While this hierarchical structure provides a “comfortable and supportive” sense of control and efficiency for those “sitting at the decision-making table”, it can also create distance between citizens and decision-makers. This, combined with the perception that experts are more concerned with protecting the interests of their profession than with serving the community, can “result in ‘trademarking knowledge’”, which hinders the sharing of information and best practices, undermines trust and compromises opportunities for engagement.

Indeed, the dominant system, however well-intentioned, often approaches citizen involvement with condescension, questioning citizens capability to engage: “I wonder if they were misunderstanding or not taking the time to read 400 pages of the document to understand the vision”. This also highlights a mismatch between the system’s emphasis on bureaucratic compliance (e.g., producing lengthy documents) and the need to engage citizens in meaningful ways. Since these two modes of communication are often not aligned, there may be inconsistencies between the system’s intentions and its actual ability to engage citizens. As a result, citizens may become disengaged from the planning process if they feel that their voices are not heard or valued.

Addressing these issues requires recognising that citizen engagement is not just a formality in the “governance of how to make a plan”, but a fundamental component of effective urban change.

Knowledge About Place: Translating Citizen Engagement

A major challenge in bridging the gap between expert-driven and citizen-informed planning is the difficulty of translating the richness of the emergent system’s tapestry of knowledge into the formal planning system. Indeed, a key theme that emerged from our workshops is a growing discomfort with the notion that communities do not have the expertise to shape their own environment. Such a perspective overlooks the crucial distinction between ‘knowledge about planning’ and ‘knowledge about place’: while technical expertise in the planning process is essential, communities must be regarded as experts in their own experiences of, and aspirations for, the environment in which they live. The tension within and between these perspectives lies at the heart of the challenges faced by LCC in promoting citizen engagement.

While there is widespread agreement that the collective knowledge and experience of community members is extremely valuable, LCC also recognises that it is often difficult to incorporate this effectively into planning documents: “we all believe in bottom-up approaches, but they don’t translate well”. This highlights the discrepancy between the theoretical ideal of community-led planning, which involves a sense of ownership and agency among community members, and the practical challenges of implementing such approaches within existing institutional frameworks. In fact, even when the value of bottom-up initiatives is recognised, systemic barriers often prevent their full integration into the planning process – as evidenced, for instance, by the lack of effective mechanisms for information sharing and consensus building across different scales.

This lack of translation between experiences of citizens and requirements of planning can be exacerbated by the emphasis on technical expertise (previously discussed as ‘the cult of expert’). As one planner noted, “there is lots of involvement in Leeds, but there is still work to be done to make it good for us”. This suggests that there is a gap between the perceived involvement of citizens and the actual influence of citizen engagement in the planning process: for involvement to be “good for [planners]”, citizens’ contributions need to conform to the formal, technical language and terminology of the planning process, which, however, tends to be unfamiliar to the public, making it difficult for them to understand and participate in the planning process. The resulting sense of exclusion can be both a disincentive for citizens to get involved and a source of frustration and burnout for those trying to make engagement work, including council officers.

The focus on technical expertise can also lead to a narrow view of what constitutes knowledge: planners may value quantitative data and technical analysis, but overlook other forms of knowledge, including the unique expertise that communities have in their own neighbourhoods. This can result in a planning process that is disconnected from the lived experiences of citizens and unresponsive to their needs and aspirations.

Knowledge About Priorities: Managing Expectations

The integration of ‘knowledge about planning’ and ‘knowledge about place’ in the processes of urban change is a particular challenge for LCC because of the multiple and often conflicting expectations that they must manage.

LCC strives to balance a plethora of voices from their communities and stakeholders about how they want the city to change and adapt to their needs. This involves navigating a complex interplay of local aspirations: “we genuinely want the best for Leeds, but different positions may see this ‘best’ in different ways, which leads to different outcomes”. In fact, despite a shared desire for positive change in Leeds, different interpretations of ‘best’ may reflect conflicting priorities, creating an inherent tension between perspectives and complicating the already difficult task of reaching agreement.

External influences and the constraints of hierarchical governance, political pressures and economic interests exacerbate this internal tension between diverse local aspirations and the pursuit of a common ‘best’ for Leeds. As outlined in section 3.1.2, these factors introduce additional complexities and challenges into the decision-making process. For example, trade-offs may be necessary when external pressures from regional, national or international actors conflict with local priorities. In addition, economic interests, including those of developers, investors and other economic actors, can put pressure on LCC to prioritise certain development pathways over others, potentially at the expense of other community objectives. Political considerations can also influence planning decisions, creating tensions between short-term political gains and long-term planning objectives. Finally, the hierarchical structure of governance, where power is unequally distributed and most decisions are taken at a higher level, may limit the capacity of local communities to play a full part in shaping the future of their city.

The awareness that urban planning is a complex process involving the weighing of different priorities leads to a widespread concern among council officers that “communities may not understand the need to balance competing interests”. Specifically, the concern is that if communities view planning initiatives solely through the lens of their own immediate needs and desires, without considering the wider implications, they may lack understanding and therefore support. This, in turn, can foster opposition to planning initiatives and lead to disillusionment with engagement efforts, no matter how well thought out and well intentioned.

The increase in democratic capability built through participation in local development can increase citizens understanding of the constraints facing LCC and form basis for a more informed and productive dialogue. For example, acknowledging that “LCC is driven very strongly by National Planning Politics and by other cities planning standards” can provide a transparent foundation for an honest conversation with communities about the agency and limits of planning. It can also give the public a clearer understanding of when they may need to take matters into their own hands and act “in defiance of the council”, as external pressures on LCC are unlikely to abate – emphasising again the delicate balance between permissiveness and responsibility. By recognising the limitations imposed by external factors, communities can be empowered to advocate more effectively for their priorities and explore alternative strategies to achieve their desired outcomes.

03.3.4

CHANGE

The ultimate focus of all the activities involved in taking action, producing knowledge and planning is to instigate urban change. However, activities in one area alone are insufficient to drive change at the necessary rate – for example, producing knowledge of ever increasing precision without acting on it.

Similarly, acting without a longer-term plan may mean that action is not coordinated or its effects are not cumulative, thereby reducing its impact. Activity is needed in all areas to more effectively drive urban change – and, importantly, there needs to be connections between all areas.

That said, it is important to note that change itself is a contested concept, shaped by different power dynamics, ethical considerations and visions of the future. Change is also subject to significant uncertainty, given the complexity of urban systems, and the approach to managing this differs greatly between the systems. Therefore, exploring conceptions of change and attitudes to uncertainty is crucial when considering how action, knowledge and planning combine to drive change.

Conceptions of change: different end goals and different processes

Ultimately, the dominant and emergent systems have different underlying assumptions about change, leading to competing visions of the city's future.

The dominant system has its roots in a linear, efficiency-driven approach to change, and those "sitting at the table" may argue that this approach is necessary to ensure the city's prosperity and competitiveness. When change is inevitable or even encouraged (for example, to promote economic growth), the dominant system often seeks to control its course. This is what Local Plans are designed to do, as comprehensive strategies to guide a city's growth and development. They typically involve a detailed analysis of the local economy, infrastructure, environment and social conditions in order to outline specific objectives and targets for the future, such as creating jobs, improving mobility and promoting sustainability. Essentially, Local Plans provide a framework for decision-making and resource allocation by identifying key priorities and challenges and ensuring that change is in line with the overall vision for the future. As such, they play a crucial role in shaping the direction of urban change.

In this context, change is typically initiated and implemented by those who are "sitting at the top of the table", from where they assume to possess the "clearest/best view" of the city's needs. In terms of citizen engagement, this approach to change suggests that the dominant system provides "structure and leadership" for citizens and local communities to participate in the process. However, this "concentration of power" can also create a sense of detachment for those that are "observing passively" from the sidelines.

For its part, LCC is expected to bridge this gap by "contact[ing] people on behalf of others [and] advocating for those who do not have power" – essentially acting as an interlocutor to amplify their voices and ensure that their interests are taken into account.

Yet, the lack of meaningful change resulting from this approach can raise doubts about the sincerity of the dominant system's commitment to citizen engagement:

> *Do authorities really want people to rock the boat?*

The emergent system, on the other hand, takes a more democratic and decentralised approach to change, recognising the importance of grassroots initiatives and active citizen participation in shaping the city's future. In the emergent system, change tends to be driven by the lived experiences and collective actions of citizens and communities: rather than relying on top-down planning and implementation, change is often initiated and shaped by those "at the periphery of the table", who are not only directly affected by the issues at hand, but also "see patterns and synergies with and between what's happening farther away from the table".

While the dominant system may be focused on achieving its predetermined goals, this synergistic approach aims to incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences, and to adapt and evolve in response to the changing needs and aspirations of its communities. However, this can lead to fragmentation and duplication.

The Cost of Caution

The dominant system, with its formal structures and hierarchical authority, is often cautious in its approach to change, driven by a desire to maintain stability and avoid disruption. In Leeds, for example, the hierarchical structure of the dominant system is perceived as “comfortable and supportive” for those working within it, which “gives [them] confidence that LCC will look after the interests of citizens”.

Such perceptions can make it difficult to advocate for change, even when it is recognised that this structure “comes at the risk that you don't step outside”. This cautious approach manifests itself in a number of ways to resist change, including bureaucratic inertia and risk aversion: complex procedures can slow down decision-making and implementation, while fear of unintended consequences can discourage innovation and experimentation by focusing on avoiding negative outcomes.

Furthermore, individuals and groups with vested interests in the current way of doing things may resist change to protect their (usually economic) positions. This resistance is a significant source of friction and can impede the implementation of even necessary changes, making those on the margins of the dominant system feel powerless and passive.

The inherent complexity of city systems also causes problems for this cautious, risk-averse approach to urban change. Within such complex systems, it is almost impossible to predict the outcome of intervention due to the extensive and interwoven relationships between physical assets (like infrastructure and buildings) and political and social networks (including community groups, governance structures and economic forces). Therefore, unintended consequences cannot be entirely avoided, and the ability to fully control the trajectory of change becomes an illusion.

This suggests that a more adaptable approach that allows for experimentation is crucial to enabling urban change. The challenge lies in connecting this adaptable and experimental approach to an overarching plan or vision to ensure that change progresses in a more sustainable direction.

Connections for change

Building on this notion of complexity, it is clear that change, rather than being linear, emerges from the dynamic interplay of planning, knowledge and action, and the constant interaction between dominant and emergent systems. There is a temptation to collect knowledge for specific purposes with ever increasing precision or from a broader range of sources as possible; however, if this knowledge is not acted on, or if plans are delayed while more knowledge is collected, change will not happen.

Furthermore, if knowledge collected for very specific purposes, such as consultation on formal planning documents or in a community-led research project, is used only for that purpose, this can be very “resource inefficient and wasteful”. The value of that knowledge, which could inform other strategies or actions in other parts of the city, is lost when it is not connected to other projects and organisations.

In the dominant system, it could be argued that there is too much focus on planning and on using limited sources of knowledge, at the cost of action. In the emergent system, action is prioritised over planning, often at the cost of coordination.

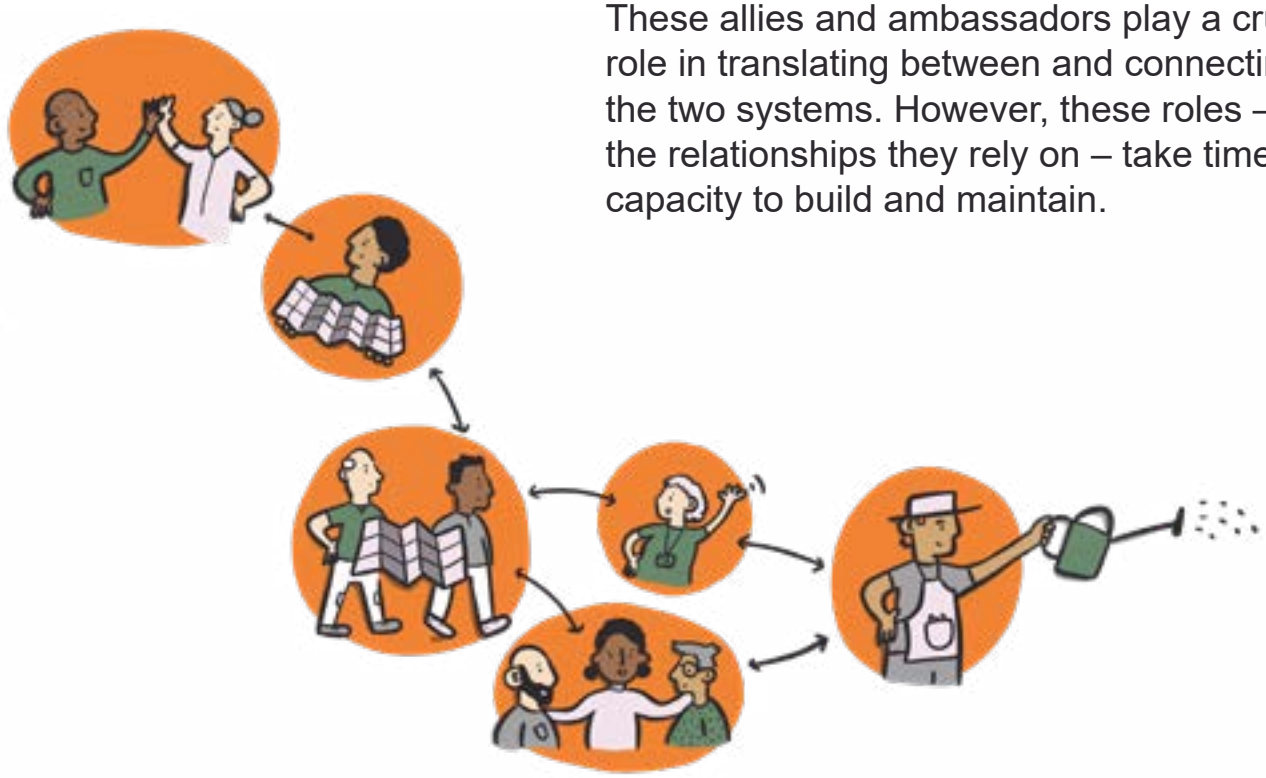
Workshops highlighted the need for “good enough knowledge” that allows people to take action that is reasonably likely to have a positive impact in a timely manner. It is apparent that there is a great deal of knowledge available to support urban change but that it needs to be mobilised sufficiently well to allow citizens and other stakeholders to act on it, thus the connection between knowledge and action is currently quite weak.

It is understandably difficult for the public sector to act on “good enough” knowledge, given the amount of scrutiny they face and their accountability for divesting public funds. However, given the complexity of the system, a greater focus on action – and on using the response to action as a source of knowledge – could be crucial to accelerate change.

Similarly, the connection between local action and wider city planning (and knowledge) is currently relatively weak. While LCC's ABCD and the LCAN foster knowledge sharing and best practices among community groups, the integration of these insights into LCC's planning functions remains unclear. Consequently, it is often difficult to see how local actions are reflected in Local Plan's spatial allocations or policies, with most community groups operating outside the planning system. Though formal Neighbourhood Plans do provide a link, their limited scope often reduces their impact on significant urban change. This weak link between action and planning can hinder collective action, limit collaboration across different areas, and ultimately reduce the potential for impactful change at the city scale.

Important issues that concern citizens, such as public transport efficiency, cannot be solved by local action in isolation, so unless there is better connection between areas, and between action, knowledge and planning, crucial parts of urban change may not happen, or citizens may find themselves unable to participate effectively in shaping these changes.

Workshops also highlighted the importance of relationships in making these connections between planning, action and knowledge, and between the dominant and emergent systems. Participants identified allies in the dominant system, including the Neighbourhood Planning and Engagement team in LCC, who were able to represent the interests of community and neighbourhood groups and ambassadors in the emergent system, and VAL, who could advocate for the aspirations and contributions of citizens.

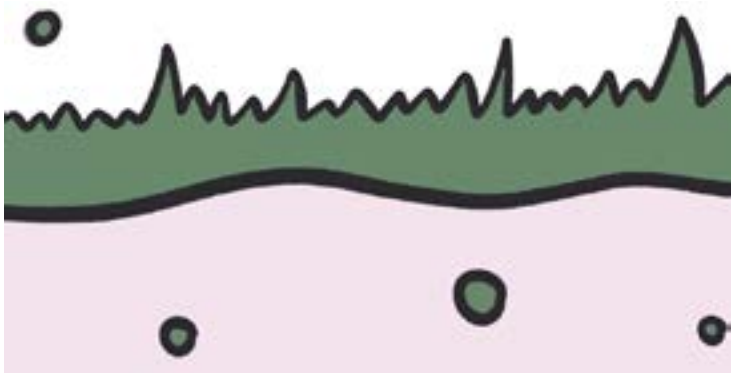


These allies and ambassadors play a crucial role in translating between and connecting the two systems. However, these roles – and the relationships they rely on – take time and capacity to build and maintain.

03.3.5 COMPOSTING AND CHANGE

Composting, within the two-loop model, is a vital process for transitioning from current (dominant and emergent) systems towards a desired future. It actively re-purposes elements from existing systems to ‘feed’ the new one – a concept workshop participants found particularly useful for articulating tensions and challenges associated with system change. This isn't a quick fix: composting takes time to produce, and its desired impact is long-term and results from continued, sustained effort rather than a one-off activity; composting is multi-faceted and “has two important elements, nutrients and structure”; and, crucially, composting highlights the need to remove and re-purpose unhelpful elements of the dominant system that hinder transformation.

Participants discussed what would need to be composted, recognising that the constraints originating from the “shadowy place” of national planning policy and neoliberal economics would persist; yet there was optimism that real change could be achieved in the presence of this “shadowy place”, as long at its impact was recognised. Interestingly, one participant noted how recognising constraints reduced the emotional toll and boosted effectiveness of action. Participants also noted the fear and defensiveness that might stem from the notion of composting and the implication that some structures, processes and roles might be unnecessary. Nevertheless, there was agreement that composting key ideas within the dominant and emergent systems would be crucial to enable change, particularly ideas around the value of citizen knowledge and presumptions of certainty and linearity in urban change. Therefore, recommendations include work to compost key ideas, as well as creating new structures and processes.



04

RECOMMENDATIONS

The PAKC model helps us to understand the dynamics at the interplay between the dominant and emergent systems of urban change. In this section, we turn our attention to how to build bridges between the systems to achieve meaningful citizen engagement in urban change.

As a reminder, the dominant system prioritises bureaucratic efficiency through consultation processes aimed at fairness and transparency, but often fails to meaningfully incorporate citizen input, perpetuating power imbalances and marginalising voices; by contrast, the emergent system, while vibrant and innovative, can suffer from fragmentation and lack of broader impact, as citizens participate in matters directly and indirectly affecting their lives but do not influence city-level decisions. It seems unlikely that engagement, where citizens have meaningful involvement, influence and accountability in urban governance, can occur within either system in isolation, so the challenge is in navigating the interplay between them and addressing their underlying complexities.

Examining this complexity has generated a series of recommendations to achieve meaningful engagement by addressing power imbalances, fragmentation and communication barriers. Recommendations address action from LCC and from neighbourhood and community groups, since movement within both loops is necessary for transformation.

RECOGNISE AND VALUE CITIZEN KNOWLEDGE

Recognise the broad range of neighbourhood and community groups that participate in urban change and seek to engage them in development planning and local action

This involves identifying the ‘pioneering efforts’ relating to urban change that are already underway, including actions, knowledge production and planning. By recognising the breadth of actions, knowledge and plans, LCC could better understand the ‘why’ behind preferences and objections expressed during consultations, leading to more informed and responsive decision-making. In turn, neighbourhood and community groups could better understand how to engage in city-wide activities and how to improve inclusivity.

Collect existing knowledge from neighbourhood and community groups as part of Local Plan evidence gathering

Knowledge relevant to planning is collected both directly through formal consultations or community participation activities, and indirectly through dayto-day interactions with citizens. This knowledge can enrich wider development planning by providing a broader contextual understanding and specific spatial evidence. Collating existing knowledge, particularly during the evidence-gathering phase of plan development, goes beyond mere compliance with regulations and aligns with principles of citizen engagement and accountability. Digital infrastructure can support the process of collating this knowledge and significantly reduce the structural barriers to knowledge mobilisation identified in this report. While requiring initial resource investment, this approach can ultimately prove more resource-efficient over the long term than direct knowledge collection and significantly reduce waste.

Compost ideas about the value of citizen knowledge and demonstrate its impact on decision making and local action

Both preceding recommendations require a reconfiguration of the value of citizen knowledge, recognising the variation in perception across LCC and across neighbourhood community groups. Work is needed to increase confidence in the knowledge generated through a range of activities and how it might inform decisions within LCC and neighbourhoods and communities. Demonstrations to show how knowledge has been collected and used will be crucial to this process.

Develop capacity to translate knowledge from neighbourhoods and community groups into a format relevant to planning and local action.

This involves recognising the unique contributions of these groups, whose insights may not directly align with traditional planning formats or focuses. For instance, where community knowledge often focuses on place and lived experience, planning requires spatial allocations and policy directives. Bridging this gap might require additional work to translate community aspirations and challenges into actionable planning terms. This will be a crucial step in reducing bureaucratic complexity and meeting LCC's aspiration to listen to and act on citizen voices. Furthermore, the effective repurposing of knowledge, whether for different purposes or by different groups, requires a corresponding increase in capacity within both LCC and neighbourhood and community groups. The LCAN listening exercise and Community Research Network (CRN) provide ideal opportunities to do this.

Develop democratic capability and process knowledge to improve citizen understanding of how knowledge is produced and used in decision making

This involves identifying opportunities to build democratic capabilities, aiming to improve public understanding of national process constraints and increase citizen confidence in engaging with knowledge production, planning and action. This could be achieved through activities led by both neighbourhood and community groups, as well as LCC. The proposed Community Research Network (CRN) in Leeds would increase capacity in community and neighbourhood knowledge production, increasing skills and confidence. This capacity could then be expanded to ensure that the knowledge generated by the CRN is used to directly inform planning and actions at both neighbourhood and communities and LCC levels.

Building capacity within the planning process, particularly in identifying effective and accessible engagement points, could significantly reduce public disengagement. While not all citizens will choose to engage with democratic processes, the possibility of their involvement is crucial for rebalancing power dynamics.

ENABLE AND CONNECT CITIZEN ACTION AND PLANNING

Connect and support neighbourhood and community groups engaged in knowledge production or action to each other and to LCC

Once ‘pioneers’ have been identified and recognised, the next crucial step is to connect them – that is, to create a network of individuals, organisations and initiatives that share a common interest in local planning and urban change. Such a network can facilitate knowledge exchange, initiate and coordinate collective action and build relationships that are essential to sustain the network over time. Adequate funding is required to support activities and platforms that enable individuals and organisations to learn from each other, share best practices and discuss challenges. Connection between neighbourhood and community group networks and LCC networks are also crucial to bridge gaps between the dominant and emergent system. Examples include finding more routine connections between the LCAN and Leeds Inclusive Anchors Network, and between the Community Listening Exercise and Community Research Network and LCC policy and strategic planning. This includes providing sufficient funding to build relationships necessary to support this connective work.

Engage community and neighbourhood groups in translating knowledge

Community and neighbourhood groups possess invaluable experience in addressing local challenges and identifying local aspirations, making them crucial partners in interpreting citizen knowledge and bridging the gap to planning. To ensure the nuances and complexities of local knowledge are interpreted and translated appropriately, it is essential to actively involve neighbourhood and community group members in this process. This could be through inviting groups to participate in a Partnership Board, similar to those set up in the health and care sector. Importantly, their role on this board would be to oversee and advise on the translation of community voices into planning knowledge, rather than to represent them directly.

To ensure accountability, clearly articulate how community and neighbourhood knowledge have informed planning documents

This involves recognising neighbourhood and community contributions, particularly following translation, by explicitly acknowledging the influence and value of citizen knowledge on planning decisions. This goes further than responding to formal public consultations, to actively demonstrating a commitment to community-led planning by signalling within proposals how evidence gathered from communities has shaped spatial allocations and policies.

Cultivate an environment for experimentation including composting ideas of certainty and linearity

Concerns about instability and disruption are understandable. However, the inherent uncertainty and contingency of urban systems make it impossible to predict the precise effects of interventions. To drive urban change, experimentation with places, business models and modes of governance is essential. LCC could foster such an environment by providing dedicated funding and capturing the full range of experimental outcomes, including the valuable ‘process learning’ that builds citizens and organisations’ democratic capability. An important part of this environment would be to address the culture that seeks certainty and assumes linearity between interventions and outcomes. This could be through actively engaging with and evaluating failure and altering processes to allow for assessment of uncertainty and alternative futures.

Connect experiments to each other and to broader planning processes

The complexity of urban systems means that experiments can have unintended impacts on sectors and places beyond their immediate scope. Conversely, external actions and processes can influence an experiment’s success. Therefore, a systemic approach to experimentation that allows these linkages to be explored and addressed is essential.

OVERCOME POWER IMBALANCES AND COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Where evidence or representation is lacking, or where issues are particularly contentious, target engagement activities to those populations or issues

Those least often heard are frequently unable to engage due to economic, social or physical constraints. Targeting engagement activities towards these groups helps to correct this inequality of opportunity to engage. Similarly, asking all people about every planning issue would require more resource than is available. A more effective approach would be to focus resources on the most contentious or complex issues, allowing for better-quality engagement.

When addressing contentious or complex issues, prioritise deliberative engagement whenever possible

Deliberative approaches enable citizens to consider an issue in more depth and breadth, fostering a more comprehensive understanding than methods like surveys and drop-in activities. These approaches require greater time and resources but ultimately lead to better-quality and more considered evidence that short-term, individual consultation.

Build capacity in using creative and experiential methods of engagement to support articulation of citizen concerns

There was some reticence to using creative and experiential methods in current consultation activities. However, participants acknowledged their effectiveness in stimulating more open and frank discussions about issues, particularly worldviews and assumptions that often underpin development planning but are rarely explicitly addressed. This deeper level of engagement could uncover valuable insights into how systems are perceived to function and help address the challenge highlighted by LCC: citizens often express their ‘wants’ but not their underlying ‘whys’.

Appropriately resource allies and advocates that are crucial to connecting dominant and emergent systems and to enabling transition between systems

Both LCC and neighbourhood and community groups identified the importance of allies in the dominant system who represent the interests of community and neighbourhood groups, and ambassadors in the emergent system who advocate for the aspirations and contributions of citizens. Both roles are crucial to bridging the two systems to improve communication, raise the voice of citizens and streamline processes to rebalance power. However, these roles rely on relationships that take time and resources to build, as well as regular activities to promote interaction. Therefore, their importance should be recognised and funded appropriately to ensure that relationships can be maintained. Additional activities may be required to improve connections between the dominant and emergent systems, particularly relating to connecting community and city-wide anchor networks, connecting community action and the planning system, and managing the composting of unhelpful processes and ideas.

Compost ideas that citizen engagement is limited to one-off formal processes designed to reach all citizens

Assumptions regarding the format and reach of citizen engagement often shape perceptions of what constitutes valuable knowledge. When combined with the very limited budgets available for citizen involvement, this drives approaches to involvement that prioritise shallow activities open to all citizens. While often driven by a requirement for accountability (for both LCC and neighbourhood and community groups), these approaches can reinforce – rather than directly address – existing inequalities in access to involvement and power imbalances. Addressing these challenges requires a culture shift alongside a commitment to experimentation.

05

CONCLUSION

Leeds City Council is committed to actively listening to citizens and shifting power to sit with citizens and communities. This report explored the realities of citizen engagement in Leeds to identify both challenges and opportunities, and investigated the potential of creative methods to enhance inclusion and impact. We examined two coexisting systems of urban development: a dominant system focused on bureaucratic efficiency, fairness and transparency through consultation, and an emergent system characterised by vibrant, innovative citizen participation in urban change.

B. Both systems are pioneering new ways of working to promote citizen involvement: within the dominant system, the Neighbourhood Planning and Engagement Team at LCC supports Neighbourhood Planning Forums to integrate diverse perspectives into neighbourhood plans; concurrently, the emergent system embraces formal community groups like Hyde Park Source – which has transformed underused spaces into community hubs for food production, social interaction and environmental sustainability – as well as informal community activists who lead and drive specific projects. Yet, despite these efforts, power imbalances, fragmentation and communication barrierspresent significant barriers to engagement, where citizens have meaningfulinvolvement, influence and accountability.

There are many forces holding these barriers in place. These include national planning policy and a growth-based ideology – what our participants described as the ‘shadowy place’ undermining their efforts. While this influence is unlikely to disappear soon, its presence and impact must be acknowledged in any analysis of change and accommodated in the formulation of recommendations.

The interplay between dominant and emergent systems is vital for building bridges and composting unhelpful perceptions and processes. A key example is the Neighbourhood Planning and Engagement team transferring planning knowledge to Neighbourhood Forums, thereby building democratic capacity, or Voluntary Action Leeds advocating for citizen aspirations and contributions.

This systemic interplay is complex, and the PAKC model provides a useful framework for analysis. It stresses the interconnectedness of Planning, Action, Knowledge and Change, emphasising the need for balance to move from consultation and participation to meaningful engagement. At the same time, the model also recognises that different actors interpret and prioritise these components differently, with consequent implications for the direction of urban development.

Application of the PAKC model identified the necessity for activity within both systems to: recognise and value citizen knowledge, ensuring existing knowledge influences planning; enable and connect citizen action and planning, reducing fragmentation between citizen-led initiatives and between citizen and Leeds City Council (LCC) actions; and overcome power imbalances and communication barriers by creating an ecology of engagement activities and approaches, especially for contentious issues.

Ultimately, strong relationships and consistent funding to cultivate them will be crucial. Without these, it will be challenging to ensure citizen needs and aspirations are represented in urban development processes and for unhelpful perceptions and processes to be composted.

APPENDIX 1:

Details of workshop methods

A1.1

Photovoice

Prior to the workshop, participants were asked to bring three pictures representing

- something they want others to know about them,
- what ‘participation’ means to them,
- what they enjoy about the environment they live in (or what they would want it to look like).

In order to open up the dialogue, each participant gave a short introduction on the basis of their first picture, followed by a group exploration of the rest of the pictures. These were displayed together. Participants were invited to identify connections between two or three images within the theme of ‘participation’ and share their insights with the group. To deepen understanding, original owners of selected images were encouraged to share perspectives.

This icebreaker introduced the concept of shared interpretations and diverse perspectives while encouraging initial connections between participants.

A1.2
Collaboration framework

In the interest of promoting cooperation and inclusiveness, participants jointly agreed on ground rules for how they would interact. These emphasised confidentiality, firstperson, openness, respect and active listening. While these ground rules provided a basis for constructive dialogue, the balance between participants' contributions and the management of time constraints proved to be a challenge. The role of the facilitator was crucial in maintaining focus, encouraging balanced participation and adapting to the dynamics of the group. It required constant attention and adaptation to strike the right balance between encouraging open expression and keeping to the workshop timetable.

A1.3
Positioning ourselves in a changing world

In order to explore participants' perceptions of their role in local development and to uncover underlying power dynamics, a physical 'stage' was created. Chairs were arranged in different configurations to symbolise potential positions within the local development process. Participants began the activity by positioning themselves on the 'stage' to represent the roles that they perceived themselves to have. Guided reflection encouraged participants to deepen their understanding of their chosen position and its implications, and to share any surprising or impactful insights they had gained from the activity. They were then invited to reconfigure the 'stage' to represent their ideal roles and relationships, which stimulated discussions about desired changes.

Throughout the activity, facilitators recorded participants' insights on an empathy map to help the identification of themes and perspectives.

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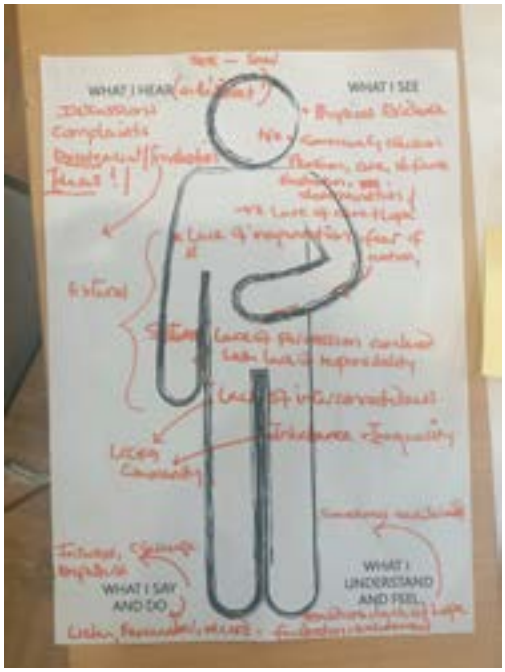
A1.4
Empathy mapping

Individual empathy maps – i.e., a visual tool to help participants organise their thoughts, feelings, actions and aspirations – were then distributed to deepen understanding of participants' perspectives and aspirations. Each map was divided into four quadrants, each of which represented a different part of the participants' experience:

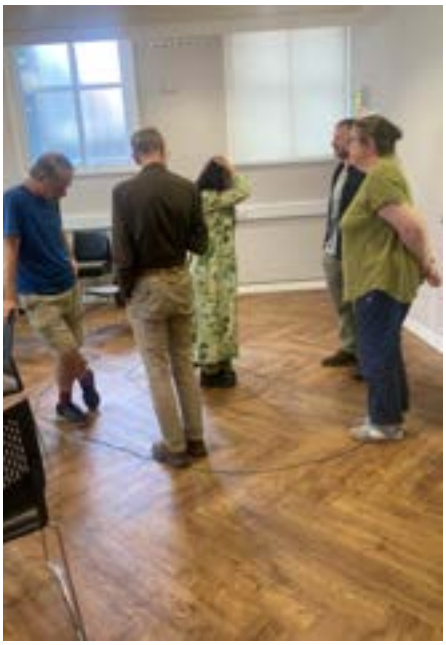


- What I hear from others
- What I see others doing
- What I understand and feel
- What I say and do

The empathy maps enabled participants to articulate their own perspectives while considering the wider community context by distinguishing between what they themselves understand, feel, say and do, and what others around them understand, feel, say and do.

Participants were asked to consider their ideal future in the local context and to document what they thought, felt and hoped for on their empathy map. After individual reflection, participants shared their maps to identify commonalities and differences.

A1.5
Situating knowledge



To collectively map existing knowledge, participants were asked to place themselves in a spiral, without prior discussion, based on their perceived level of knowledge about 'participation in planning processes'. Starting with those who positioned themselves as 'less knowledgeable', participants were asked to share one piece of information on the topic. To create a visual representation of the group's collective knowledge, this information was recorded on a large sheet of paper.

A1.6
Relational and temporal knowledge map

Building upon the knowledge spiral activity, participants reflected on their personal learning journeys related to ‘participation in urban development’. They individually identified key moments of learning, unlearning and understanding, and captured these on post-it notes. These reflections were then mapped onto the knowledge spiral, creating a visual representation of the interconnectedness and evolution of knowledge within a social context.

This activity aimed to ground knowledge in personal experiences and develop a deeper understanding of when and how knowledge is acquired. Facilitators played a crucial role in recording these insights and visually representing the connections between knowledge nodes.

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A1.7

Pictorial narrative

To capture the rich tapestry of ideas and discussions that emerged during the workshop, a live illustrator was commissioned to create a visual representation: as the workshop progressed, the illustrator captured key themes, insights and connections, creating an artwork that reflected the group's collective thinking. At the end of the workshop, the artwork was presented to the participants, who were invited to provide feedback and suggestions to allow for final refinement and to ensure that the finished piece accurately represented the group's collective insights. This collaborative process resulted in a compelling visual summary of the workshop's findings and provided an opportunity for collective reflection on the key takeaways.

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APPENDIX 2:

Berkana Two-Loop Model

The Berkana Institute's Two Loop Model of system change

The Berkana Institute is a charitable organisation applying knowledge and theory about change to leadership, community and organisations. It has developed the Two-Loop model[1] to help understand how change happens in living systems. A key element of the model is the fact that it engages with the movement and relationships between a dominant and emergent system.

The upper loop represents the existing, dominant system. As this system ascends in power and influence (as shown by the inclined curve) leaders in that system seek to stabilise and structure that system for long-term sustainability. As long as the system is thriving, this stabilisation makes sense and leaders (often called stewards) focus on maintenance and managing the long-term health and sustainability of the system. However, change (which might come from internal sources or the external context) is inevitable and this change may make the dominant system less fit for purpose and able to sustain itself. As a system reaches its peak, signs appear of problems that will lead to its decline. After this, the dominant system will decline and transition to a new, more appropriate system, which has been developing in parallel. This can create emotional challenges of loss and grieving and require creativity to manage transition to a new system more fit for purpose. Hospicing is an important aspect of the downwards part of the loop, helping decline to happen gracefully and fairly. Some parts of the dominant system may transition into a new system, but others need to be composted to fertilise a new, emergent system.

The lower loop represents an alternative system, which emerges from the decline of the dominant system. Within the dominant system, there are pioneers, which, at signs of decline, or from a lack of alignment with the values of the dominant system, create new ways of working. This is a crucial contribution of the two-loop model – that new forms of being and doing are born within old forms and emerge in the midst of the dominant system, not separate to it. These innovations tend to work in isolation and are not recognised by the dominant system so can struggle to gain traction. Therefore, they are subject to constraints from that system which can significantly limit emergence. This relationship between the two loops is crucial to understanding some of the challenges of system change but is frequently overlooked in other representations.

Connections between these innovations and pioneers can form networks and build trust to allow the sharing of knowledge. If these networks are provided with resources, their influence can grow as systems possess qualities and capacities that are not present in an individual part of that system. As networks create communities of practice, the share knowledge, and accelerate innovation, meaning a new system can take root. Importantly, the resources that nourish this emergent system

1 Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze: Using emergence to take social innovations to scale. The Berkana Institute: https://berkana.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Emergence-Booklet-English.pdf

Diagram of the model available at: The two loops model of change, Part 1. Chris Corrigan: https://www.chriscorrigan.com/parkinglot/the-two-loops-model-of-change-part-1/

need to be diverted from the dominant system. The two-loop model proposes many ways to support this network development and growth. Firstly, by **naming** the pioneers and recognising their experiences that are valuable to others. Secondly, by promoting connection and facilitating gatherings. Thirdly by **nourishing** and providing resources that enable communities of practice to form. And finally, by **illuminating** and sharing learning.

An important part of transitioning from the dominant to the emergent system is enabling resources and people to flow towards innovations that have proven to be effective. In the two-loop model, it isn't necessary to start from scratch – many parts of the dominant system need to make the transition, adapting to a new paradigm and finding a place in the emergent system.

Challenges emerge if leaders and those in power try to stabilise a dominant system that is in decline. Resources can be diverted to maintaining a system that is not fit for purpose, and away from developing the emergent system. This can increase the constraints on the emergent systems, causing pioneers to work harder to develop their innovations, and can reduce the possibility of network formation, which is where system effects start to emerge and change really happens. Many system shifts are made worse by this conflict between the two-loops – where dominant system leaders try to preserve the status quo and leaders in the emergent system are shut out of change processes and access to resources that would enable them to connect and grow.

The two-loop model forces us to think more carefully about the active work that is necessary at the interface between the two loops. Hospicing is crucial to dismantle power that keeps the dominant system stable. It also provides care and compassion to the ideas, processes and people that need to be composted or supports them with transition to a new system. The need to dismantle and end things is a natural part of change but not attended to well in many models of change. Composting is also an important process, of breaking down ideas, diverting resources from the dominant system to support growth of the emergent system. This requires a great deal of courage and presents risks to those who divert resources. However, transition will not happen without a kind, intelligent and respectful letting go of things that are not fit for purpose.

Martina Ricci and Katy Roelich (2026): Leeds Model of Citizen Power and Engagement Report. White Rose Libraries. https://doi.org/10.48785/100/424