

## A guide to community consultation, collaboration and co-design

**Community** = a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.

**Consultation** = the action or process of formally consulting or discussing.

**Collaboration** = the action of working with someone to produce something.

**Co-design** (also called participatory design) = an approach to design attempting to actively involve all stakeholders (eg employees, partners, citizens) in the design process.



We asked **Toby Laurent Belson** to tell us about his experience of community consultation, collaboration and co-design. Toby is a community organiser and professional artist/designer, born in West London of English and Caribbean parents. He campaigns with groups such as Westway 23. He works with children of all backgrounds throughout West London, running art projects. He has also been a school governor.

Toby got us thinking about these questions and considerations:



**What is community?** Who are the communities I work with?  
What are my reasons for doing so?

**Why am I here?** West London is my home but I still find myself justifying my place in the community. If it is just about doing a short term project, be honest and consider what the community is really going to get out of it. Do you know that community well enough to even answer that question?



**Taking appropriate time to establish relationships with a community.** I attend meetings as a community member first. I go to understand what is happening in the local area and what affects me, not because I want to make a piece of artwork there.



**Making appropriate relationships.** When I have a more professional interest, I look for the appropriate places to build relationships and learn. For example, to learn about education I became a local school governor. I was able to give a lot in return too.

There are serious issues around the governance of local communities by people not from those communities. Consider the relationships you are building and how they sit within a community, whether that be with individual residents, families, businesses, organisations or politicians.



**Language.** There are always trendy buzz words to use. For instance *co-design* and *collaboration* are buzzwords themselves!

It's a reality that we will need to use them, for example to apply for funding, but are they relevant or real to the community? What do these words and activities actually mean to the people you are working with?

Toby gave a presentation at the Sound Connections Music and Social Justice Network, and shared more tips and suggestions:

**Spend time** experiencing a place, listening to people and building trust before you say or do anything yourself.

Work to **understand a community's concerns** and use your position to support their concerns.

**What is the community going to get out of your work?** Be really honest about what your position is and whether or not you're the right person to work there. Be cautious, self-reflective and humble.

**Where are you getting your information** about what a community needs? You can't be sure of what a place needs only by reading demographics, going by what politicians say, or what one family on a whole estate says.

**One-off consultations are often tokenistic** and don't enable real participation. Make sure people are involved throughout a process.

Be thoughtful about consultation and whether or not it has immediate **benefit for the people participating**. If you are inviting people to be involved then they should be able to take something away that is of value to them, for example tangible skills and experience they can put on a CV.

Consider what **training and support** people need in order to be confidently and effectively involved in decision making processes and structures.

When working with a community, you aren't going to get it right for everyone. Try to address/confront issues people have and be sensitive to what people are asking for, but **know that you can't solve everything**.