Social value creation with deliberative assemblies in urban development

Reporting on the case of the Westwick Row Ideas Exchange

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Author and acknowledgements

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Community Design Research Lab

The Community Design Research Lab (CDRL) is a participatory research cluster with transdisciplinary researchers and practitioners from universities and organisations within and beyond the UK. CDRL is based at the Department of Architecture and the Centre for Research in Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) at the University of Cambridge and functions as a research system aimed at generating positive social and environmental impacts with communities through experimental approaches to community-based research and action. Our research informs the methodologies of the Cambridge Room.



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1. Executive summary

1.1 Overview

This report explores the social value created with sortition-based and deliberative mini-publics, such as citizens' assemblies (CA), in urban development planning processes today. It aims to identify key impacts of the deliberative process beyond direct influence on the outcome on the specific project. For the analysis presented we draw on documents, observations, a focus group conversation and interviews with a small sample of 9 participants—including resident members, developers, land owners, and architects—from the Ideas Exchange which was convened for the masterplan design of the Westwick Row housing development in Hemel Hempstead, UK. We ask:

> *How do deliberative assemblies in development and planning contribute to social value creation?*

Below we give a brief overview of the topical focus on the citizens' assembly approach to public participation and the theoretical approach of social value creation in the context of planning.

Citizens' assemblies (CA)

Deliberative mini-publics (DMP) are formats for informed citizen participation in agenda-setting and decision-making. The most common form of DMPs today are citizens' assemblies (CA), a format which has been developed within the field of deliberative democracy and emphasises longitudinal participation of a group of citizens through learning, deliberation and collective formulation of recommendations for decision-making (Smith & Setälä, 2018). A key feature of deliberative assemblies are the use of a civic lottery, also known as sortition, to select the members of the group who are participating in the assembly. The Ideas Exchange for the Westwick Row development is inspired by the DMP approach and is considered as an innovative form of citizens' assembly (CA) in this study despite several conceptual and practical differences elaborated in *Section 1*.

Social value creation

We are interested in the social value of the CA approach for all actors and stakeholders involved in the development and planning process. The focus of this study is on the social value of the process itself and not the outcome. By focusing on the process we suggest that transformative change happens at multiple levels, including social impact in addition to political impact. We intentionally define social value broadly as the value created towards the wellbeing of affected

interests and actors beyond direct political impact and influence. Our analysis focuses on themes that emerge from interviews, focus group conversations and observations conducted as part of the study.

Findings

Resident members, architects, developers and land owners in the Ideas Exchange all recognised the value of thorough community participation in planning and urban development. Importantly, an early realisation was the plurality of communities even within the small area of Leverstock Green. While there were few concerns around accessibility related to specific procedural and technical aspects of participation, everyone had a good experience from participating and would do it again if offered. While direct impact of the Ideas Exchange on the final development is yet to be seen all participants perceived several take-aways from the deliberative process which makes it worthwhile. The take-aways that relate to our broad definitions of social value defined above comprise what we call the social value creation in the CA approach in this study. The social value creation identified falls under three themes: Trust, hope and efficacy; Future-oriented and MOTH care; Peripheral social ties.

- Efficacy, trust and hope A responsive co-design process has turned initial scepticism into renewed trust of members in the client and design teams as well as hopeful attitudes for future developments. Trust from members to designers is explicitly attested by members to the clear presentation of revised masterplan designs from one session to the next. Long-term engagement has shown to the client and design team that members not only can contribute critical lived experiences, but also possess various levels of specific technical knowledge which building designers' trust in members. Increased levels of trust and hope between actors contribute to a sense of efficacy which was expressed as newfound belief in the agency to make meaningful change—members, designers and clients are convinced that their involvement in this rigorous co-design process, despite its complexity, really makes a difference. Confidence gained from participating in the Ideas Exchange has led to unprompted ideas for innovating the process.

- Future-oriented and MOTH care The Ideas Exchange became a shared space of caring for social and ecological communities beyond the present. During the co-design

process multiple participatory “streams” ran in parallel and overlapped. Specifically the overlaps between the Collaborative Housing Group and the Ideas Exchange appears to have made significant contributions to attitude shifts from indifference to care for future residents. Similarly, a landscape-oriented masterplan design approach gave special attention to habitats and ecosystems in and around the project site. Questions of water-management and flood risk, which many members brought with them from previous experiences in Leverstock Green, evolved into deeper understandings of and care for natural water-systems and habitat-creation for more-than-human inhabitants.

- Peripheral social ties The process created a social space for the formation and sustaining of peripheral ties—transient and weak social relations crucial for quality of life and wellbeing. Since all members come from the same area—Leverstock Green or its near surroundings—peripheral ties created in the assembly extended to daily life as informal encounters such as greetings in the supermarket or the bus stop. Further, the Ideas Exchange became a talking point for members who would share their experiences and learnings with neighbours in the driveway and colleagues in the office. While mentions of these experiences appear as an afterthought and are not expressed as significant for members, they nevertheless come up frequently when asked about the overall experience of participating in the assembly. These peripheral social ties significantly contribute to social resilience and quality of life.

1.2 Audience

The audience of this report is primarily the client and design teams involved in convening, organizing and facilitating deliberative and sortition-based public engagement in planning and development processes, as well as researchers studying democratic innovations in planning and development as well as the innovative uses of deliberative democratic processes more broadly. The report offers practical insights and recommendations on the use of deliberative assemblies for planning and development and contributes novel theoretical insights into their social value contributions by building on existing literature.

A secondary audience comprise citizens—residents, communities, publics—who have participated in deliberative engagements, or are interested in these, and looking for opportunities to participate.

Lastly, this report should be of interest to civil servants working in local planning authorities (LPA) as well as elected councillors. While this report presents findings from a developer-led public participation process, the innovative approaches deployed can be gleaned and provide inspiration to encourage more meaningful formats for public participation in public planning processes.

1.3 Recommendations

From the findings in this report we have identified opportunities and challenges for social value creation with deliberative assemblies in development and planning more broadly – beginning to answer questions like: *what are the social value-creations in the Ideas Exchange as they are perceived by all participants including citizens and client and design teams? Under which conditions does social value creation take place? And when is it negated?* Based on our findings we present here a series of recommendations for future practice and research. Each recommendation comes with a short description and specific proposed action items in bullet-points.

Recommendations for future practice

Embracing contentious deliberations

As conveners of public participation processes it is important to create a space in which topics of potential conflict can be brought up and embraced without needing to be fully resolved. This will strengthen long-term trust and offer a productive collective questioning of taken-for-granted practices.

- Conveners can attempt to foresee points of contestation and make sure they are brought up during the process i.e. commercialization processes relating to house pricing and costs as well as motivations for initiating development processes
- Facilitation of deliberations can encourage and record disagreements and dissent equally to the formations of consensus-decisions by engaging in exercises of critical collective “problematizations” in parallel with problem-solving

Establishing pre- and post-design assemblies

Bringing publics into the process at a pre-design stage can help client and design teams establish initial meaningful relationships with project locations and residents. Additionally, a post-design assembly can assist

with initial work and oversight post-planning approval and construction, providing valuable feedback to designers on subsequent design changes, neighbourhood-friendly construction management, and integration of new neighbourhoods with existing, offering longitudinal and meaningful avenues for *future-oriented and more-than-human care* practices in the deliberative co-design process.

- Early outreach to local communities, potentially during bid phase
- Facilitate carry-over of 10-20% of members from pre-assembly, to main assembly (Ideas Exchange) and post-assembly to ensure continuity and capacity and knowledge transfer.

Balancing procedural fluidity and clarity

Mixing assembly-based citizen deliberation with co-design is an innovative practice—observed here in the Ideas Exchange—which attempts to strike a balance between procedural fluidity and clarity. Deliberations are fed directly into design-decisions while also recorded partially as testimonies as documented in the SCI. Balancing these two is important for the perceived legitimacy of the engagement process and the *efficacy, trust and hope* of citizens.

- Add an additional chapter in the Statement on Community Involvement (SCI) which elaborates on the sense-making process and outcomes of deliberations.
- Deliberative facilitation training of client and design team representatives who are taking part in the assembly sessions.
- Hiring a third-party facilitator who can co-lead plenary sessions and move between break-out group sessions to ensure that individuals, including client and design members, are not dominating the conversation.

Introducing and pluralising deliberative assemblies in planning

Today, deliberative assemblies in planning and development are adopted on smaller projects and on a fraction of decisions taking place. Evidence shows that adoption is often excused with limited knowledge and resources. Working towards increased adoption of rigorous public engagement processes should therefore include evidence-based knowledge and advocacy, possibilities for post-professional training, and an openness to plural formats beyond strict models.

- Develop techniques for evaluating and communicating the value of CA approaches in planning to incentivise planning authorities,

developers and civil society organisations to adopt and experiment with the approach. Resources are well spent.
- Educate architects and planners to work with publics on planning and design-decisions. Additionally, helpful would be post-professional training programmes for private land owners, developers, planners and architects dedicated to working with deliberative assemblies in planning and development.
- Conceptual openness and flexibility can allow for localising processes in meaningful ways that also take into account limited resources and innovating processes towards more socio-ecologically just governance structures. This conceptual flexibility can in no way be an excuse for less rigorous engagement.
- Make statutory requirements for citizens' assemblies on new developments of a certain size and complexity. These can be anchored both with the developers and with the local planning authorities (LPA) at various stages of planning (see Fig. 5, p. 24).

Recommendations for future research

Longitudinal and comparative studies

For further insights into the social value creation of deliberative assemblies in planning, more long-term longitudinal studies should complement cross-sectional studies. This can bring additional insights into decision-making processes by client and design teams, attitudes to participatory processes of citizens and client and design teams and how they change over time, as well as the resilience of social value creation. Additionally, comparative studies between similar types of cases can reveal place-based challenges and opportunities and contribute to localised innovations while comparative studies with alternative approaches to engagement can reveal additional challenges and opportunities for deliberative assemblies in planning and development.

Spaces of deliberation and co-creation

More research is needed on the role of the *quality of spaces for deliberation* and how they encourage specific modalities of communication. Further, research on the role of *co-creation* within the deliberative process can help us understand how agency and discourse is mediated through material and spatial engagements.

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2. Introduction

Public participation in planning, citizens' assemblies and social value creation



Fig. 1. Collective reflections on the process with the Ideas Exchange at the final pre-planning application session at Leverstock Green Primary School, Hemel Hempstead, England, November 2025. Photo by author.

2.1 Why this report?

Today *citizens' assemblies* (CAs) are increasingly being adopted as a format for rigorous public participation in collective decision-making. While public authorities are the typical convenors recent years have shown the adoption by civil society organizations, work cooperatives and cultural institutions too. An emerging phenomenon is the recent adoption of CAs for community engagement in urban development by for-profit actors like real estate developers and design teams. In this report we take a closer look at this emergent field through a single case.

The report evaluates *citizens' assemblies* as a format for public participation in urban development and planning with a focus on the *social value creation* in these processes. The study is informed by conversations, observations and documents from the Ideas Exchange for the Westwick Row development in Leverstock Green, Hemel Hempstead, England. Insights are based specifically on inductive thematic analysis of nine semi-structured interviews and a focus group conversation with citizens and client and design team members as well as supporting observations and documents.

In the following we introduce and define the topics and concepts guiding the study: Public participation in planning; citizens' assemblies (CA); and social value creation.

2.2 Public participation in planning

In the 1960s, planners and architects in Europe and the USA began advocating for the social and environmental responsibility of planners and architects by insisting on the participation of communities and citizens in the planning and design process (Kelty, 2019). In the USA, Sherry Arnstein critiqued participatory practices which were "tokenistic" and even manipulative, and famously proposed an analytical framework—the "ladder of participation"—with steps ranging from "manipulation" to "citizen control" (Arnstein, 1969). In England, citizen or public participation in planning was formally introduced in the Skeffington Report (1969) and The Town and Country Planning Act (1986) as statutory "public consultation". *Public consultation* defined as the legally mandated consultation of public opinion. Today public consultation in the UK can typically take place when: a "local plan" or "neighbourhood plan" is being developed by the local planning authority (LPA); during a pre-planning application process; or upon the submission of a planning application to determine if it will be granted permission (Cummins, 2021).

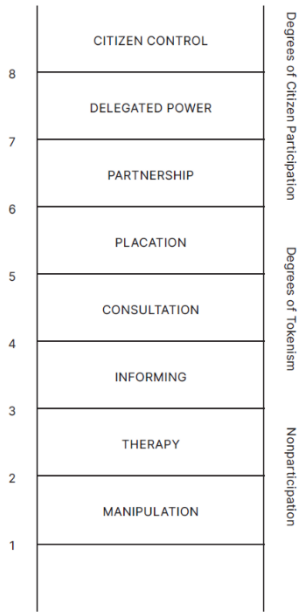


Fig. 2. Ladder of citizen participation with 8 rungs. Redrawn by author from Sherry Arnstein (1969).

Public engagement in planning differs from *public consultation*. Public engagement is considered as a longitudinal process of building relationships and skills for the community to be active participants in local decision-making and agenda-setting (Lawson et al., 2022). Taken together we consider public consultation and public engagement as public participation in this study.

Examples of innovation in public participation in planning in the UK can be found in formats such as "Urban Rooms", "Community Review Panels", and "Citizens' Assemblies". All three formats have longer histories but are becoming increasingly more prevalent in recent years.

Urban Rooms (UR) are "spaces where people can come together to create a future for their local area" based on principles of: being at sidewalk level; focusing on shared built environments; open door policy; creative activities; and being "on-site" (URN, 2024). These spaces often act as "third spaces"—or even as "fourth spaces" and "communities for meaning-making (Mou, 2023)—and are commonly located in downtown urban areas. Further, they are typically initiated in partnership between higher education institutions and civil society actors (Samuel, 2023; Tewder-Jones et al., 2020). Examples include the Farrell Centre in Newcastle, the Cambridge Room in Cambridge, UK and the Future of Cities and Urban Sustainability (FOCUS) Lab in Troy, New York, USA (See FSSI, n.d.). A similar concept called Urban Living Lab (ULL) exists across European countries as part of the broader Living Lab initiative by the EU (Petrescu et al., 2022; Von Wirth et al., 2019). After a trial period, Aarhus Municipality in collaboration with Aarhus School of Architecture launched a Urban- and Landscape-lab in January 2026 (XXXX, XXXX)—a move towards relational planning a relational planning approach that also acknowledges the interdependencies between and collective becoming of urban, suburban, peri-urban and rural areas.

Community Review Panels (CRP) or *Community Design Review Panels* (CDRP) invite community members to review planning proposals and are being experimented with by local planning authorities (LPA) across England. This innovative format often complements existing "Design Review Panels" in which design experts are consulted to review planning proposals (Saddington, 2024).

Citizens' Assemblies (CA)—which are the focus of this study—are defined in the following section. The CA is typically used as a rigorous form of public consultation, but we will discuss how findings on their social value creation from this study might also suggest their wider contribution to long-term and ongoing community engagement in urban

development and community-led placemaking by embedding them culturally and legally in the planning process.

2.3 Citizens' assemblies (CA)

The *Citizens' Assembly* (CA) is a type of *Deliberative Mini-Public* (DMP) and has been developed within the field of deliberative democracy since the 80s and 90s when democratic theory took a "deliberative turn" (Dryzek, 2002). In the past decade CAs have gained momentum with an exponential growth of implementation and experimentation in recent years as part of what has been called the "deliberative wave" (OECD, 2020).

The citizens' assembly is a procedural mechanism which organises direct participation by citizens in political decision-making and agenda-setting through facilitated deliberation (Smith & Setälä, 2018). Typically 12-150 citizens are convened—depending on the scope of the geographical area considered to be affected and the political mandate—through a process of randomized stratified selection—also known as "sortition" or "civic lottery"—to be demographically representative. Over a sustained period of time this group—the assembly of citizens—is tasked with: *learning* from their own and fellow assembly members' lived experiences, as well as field-specific technical experts; *deliberating* with each other to identify common grounds and disagreements; and *recommending* political decisions or agendas (Ibid.). An extended description of CAs can be found in the *Appendix*.

Recent UK government initiatives such as the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill since 2025, the Innovation in Democracy Programme (IiDP) from 2019 to 2020, UK Civil Society Strategy since 2018, now replaced with Civil Society Covenant since 2025, and the UK Policy Lab since 2014 promote democratic participation in policy, and from 2018—2020 IiDP ran and supported a series of pilot CA's.

2.4 Social value creation

While the literature has looked into how participation in planning can deliver social value in built assets (CCQOL, 2023; QOLF, n.d.; UKGBC, 2021) as well as how CA's working on diverse political issues make political and societal impact (See Mansbridge et al., 2012; Michels & Binnema, 2019; Owen & Smith, 2015; Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014), little attention has been given to the social value creation of the CA process

in planning and urban development. We are deliberately not making use of specific frameworks for our analysis in this study, but diverse approaches to social value creation provide a helpful context for our proposed aim and the findings presented in *Section 4*. Five approaches are briefly presented here: *The Social Value Framework; The Quality of Life Framework; Democratic innovations as social innovations; Deliberative Systems Approach; and Impact Analysis*.

The Social Value Framework developed by the UK Green Building Council in 2021 considers how built environment projects contribute added social value. The framework is tied to specific physical outcomes in the built environment and outlines four scales of social value (local community; supply chain; town/city; global society), a procedure for defining social value collectively in the context of the specific project, and a process and principles (context; place; outcomes; collaboration; process; additionality) for delivering social value through an "asset lifecycle" (UKGBC, 2021).

The Quality of Life Framework (2024) developed by the Quality of Life Foundation sets out six parameters that determine our quality of life and has specifically been developed in the context of how the built environment affects these (QOLF, n.d., p. 3). The six parameters are: control; health; nature; wonder; movement; community. In 2022 the Community Consultation for Quality of Life (CCQoL) research project undertook a nationwide study of community consultation in the four nations of the UK based on the Quality of Life Framework and informed by the practical work on Urban Rooms in multiple locations. The CCQoL study is relevant to this report for its focus on how the consultation process can contribute to social value in the built environment. With the study presented in this report, we seek to contribute to and extend the CCQoL study with specific focus on the CA approach and how the process contributes social value.

In what we tentatively refer to here as the *Democratic Innovation as Social Innovation approach* social or political initiatives aimed firstly at empowering publics and individuals are considered to create social value (von Jacobi et al, 2024; Eschweiler & Hulgård, 2012). This approach focuses firstly on the value of process over outcomes, but also attempts at their integrative analysis (Eschweiler & Hulgåard, 2012). Existing work emphasizes the lack of clear definitions of social value creation (Lehner, 2022) and proposes frameworks based on the capability approaches of Amatyr Sen (1992;1999) and Marta Nussbaum (1995) to understand how values beyond market value are created and attempted achieved towards flourishing lives (von Jacobi et al, 2024).

In *Deliberative Systems Approaches* Jane Mansbridge and John Dryzek have suggested that deliberation is not just for empowered spaces and individual processes and institutions—like CAs—but that deliberation is a capacity of a societal system which can be said to be democratic. This is the *systemic approach* to deliberative democracy which emphasizes the importance of not only empowered institutions but the role of a much larger group of actors and informal processes in society (Owen & Smith, 2015). In this study we think of the CA approach as part of a system and how it contributes to this.

In *Impact Analysis* within democracy studies, various evaluation frameworks are beginning to move beyond measuring only direct political impact and suggest looking at several societal impacts (See e.g. Michels & Binnema, 2019). This and other attempts at expanding Impact Analysis approaches suggests that the impact of CA's can be considered in broad terms to include something like social value creation. In this study we consider the analysis of social value of the CA as a contribution to existing approaches to impact analysis in democracy studies and deliberative democracy.

In summary, in this report the CA approach to public participation in development and planning is being studied with a focus on the social value creation taking place during the process—what the deliberative co-design process itself contributes of value to the involved beyond direct political impact and beyond the social value provided by resulting built assets—this is how we define our focus on social value creation moving forward in this study.

2.5 Structure of this report

In the following section we introduce the Westwick Row development in Leverstock Green, Hemel Hempstead, its stakeholders, the wider engagement efforts, the Ideas Exchange and the co-design process. The fourth section presents the findings from a thematic analysis of interviews with involved actors, a focus group session, and relevant documents from the process. A fifth section discusses the significance of the findings, some limitations and concludes with a summary of the key takeaways from the report. A series of recommendations are set out in the *Executive Summary*.

3. Westwick Row Masterplan and the Ideas Exchange



Fig. 3. Site layout workshop with the Ideas Exchange and Collaborative Housing Group at Leverstock Green Primary School, Hemel Hempstead, February 2025. Photo by Periscope.

While this report focuses on a specific part of the public participation process for the Westwick Row development in Leverstock Green—the *Ideas Exchange*—it is important to remember that processes like these always are situated in specific projects and mandates with many connected ideas, policies, stakeholders, actors and processes. The mandate of Westwick Row is different from most public participation processes which have used deliberative and sortition-based approaches before. While co-design is not a new approach in architecture, urban design and planning, it is a novelty that the CA approach is being adopted.

In the following subsections we introduce the relevant context about the Westwick Row masterplan, actors, the wider public engagement, the Ideas Exchange and the co-design process.

3.1 The masterplan for Westwick Row

According to the Design Access Statement, Westwick Row will be a new small neighbourhood on 2 ha of greenfield land with 75 homes comprising 31 cohousing homes and 44 Build to Rent homes. The intention is to provide "an example of how low-carbon design, community-shaped housing and thoughtful placemaking can be delivered in a suburban context" (TCE & TOWN, 2025, p. 5). The development site is located in the neighbourhood of Leverstock Green, in Hemel Hempstead, a Mark One New Town from the 1950s, within the Dacorum Borough Council district.

With Periscope as lead design consultant and landscape architect the project has been developed as a "landscape-led" masterplan resulting in focus on features like tree-lined streets, communal gardens, children's play spaces and a park on the northern part of the site. Following this approach a focus has been on creating "nature-based drainage features" including attenuation basins, a swale and rain integrated rain gardens.

In response to early local engagement the project proposes two housing clusters with a cohousing scheme which offers a community-led ownership model, and the Build to Rent homes offering long-term, professionally managed accommodation with "a structured range of discounted rents" (Ibid.).

Westwick Row is being planned and developed with the involvement of a range of stakeholders and actors. In the following subsections we offer an overview.

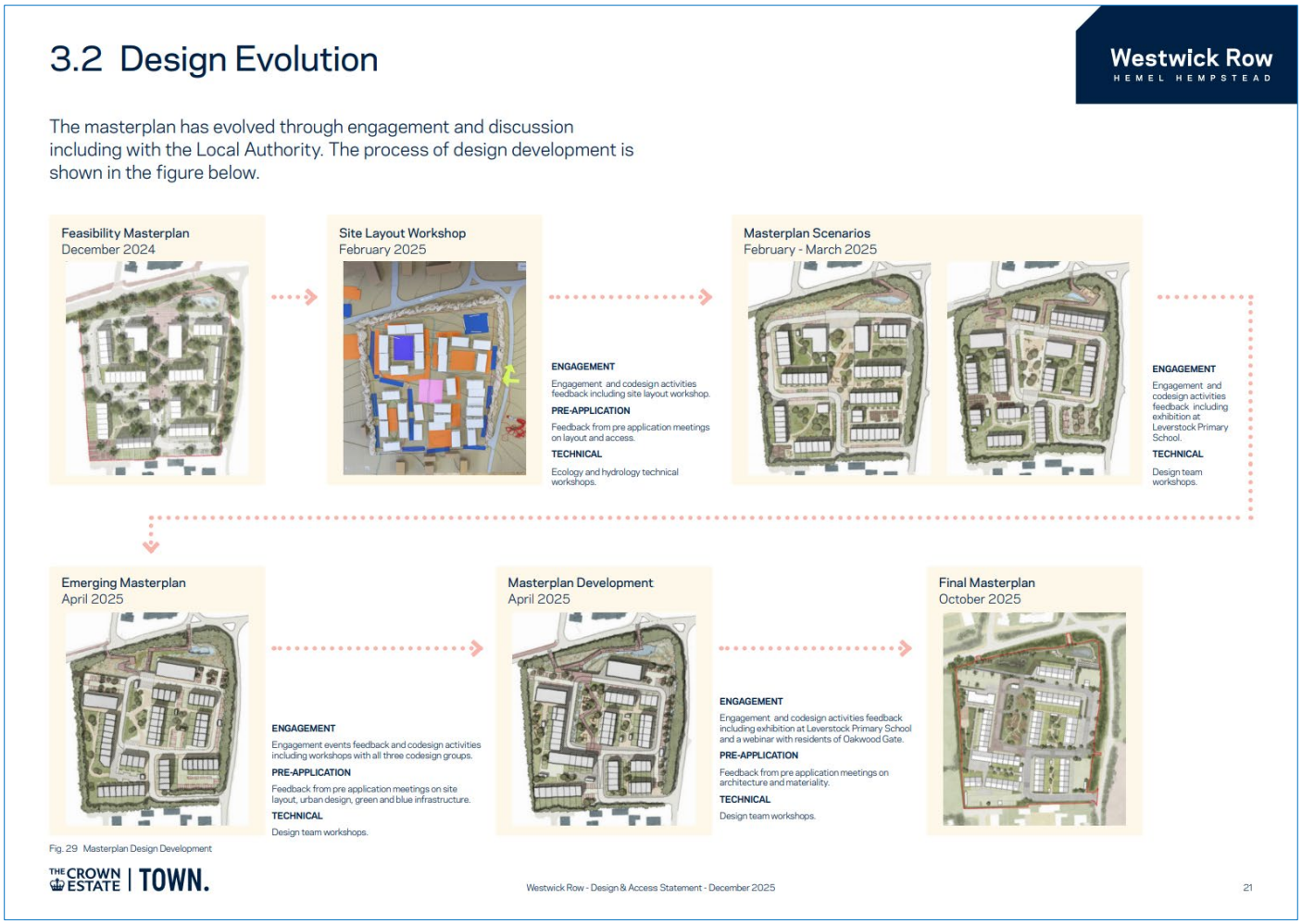


Fig. 4. Design Evolution diagram. Source: Design Access Statement, TCE and TOWN., 2026.

3.2 Client and design team

As landowners The Crown Estate is the commissioner of the development of Westwick Row. The Crown Estate has commissioned TOWN as the master developer on the project and together they make up the *client team* for Westwick Row.

The Crown Estate (TCE) is one of the largest landowners in the UK with a portfolio that stretched across England, Wales and Northern Ireland covering 200,000 acres of land. TCE is "an independent business sitting between public and private sectors, acting in the national interest both today, and for future generations." (TCE, 2026). Since 1961 The Crown Estate has managed Crown Lands surrendered by George III to the Parliament in 1760 and since 1964 it also includes Britain's seabed 12 nautical miles from the coast. Furthermore, since 2011 the profit of The Crown Estate sets the funding for the Monarch as a percentage of the annual income (Ibid.).

TOWN. is a "profit-with-purpose" developer, defined as "aligning social, environmental, and commercial returns" (TOWN, n.d.). They are

London-based and work primarily on mixed-use developments in the UK with a focus on co-housing.

Sortition Foundation, a small Cambridge-based firm specialised in sortition processes, or as they call them, "democratic lotteries", was hired to undertake the sortition-process for the Ideas Exchange.

A multidisciplinary team of consultants has worked on the design of Westwick Row. Periscope was hired as lead consultant – project lead for master planning and landscape architecture – with Archio as cohousing architect and Mole Architects as Build to Rent architect. Additionally the following consultants have been involved: David Lock Associates (planning consultant); Expedition / Useful Projects (Structural, Civil & Sustainability Engineering); Introba (MEP & Fire Engineering); Ridge (Cost Consultant); Urban Movement (Transport Consultant) as well as Applied Ecology, Apex Acoustics and SAY property and more. Below we briefly introduce the three architectural consultants who make up the core *design team*: Periscope, Archio, and Mole Architects.

Periscope is a spatial agency that focuses on regenerative designs for people and planet. They ground their projects and work in greater ecological, topographic and social fabrics. Their offices are based in London but they are registered to work in both England and Wales.

Archio is a small architecture firm based in London. They focus on housing design and designed the first direct-delivery and purpose-built community land trust housing scheme in London, the Citizens House in Lewisham. They are trained in co-design processes and have designed their own Co-Design Toolkit and an expanded Retrofit Co-Design Toolkit.

Mole Architects is a Cambridge-based architecture firm with a focus on low-energy homes and they are Certified Passive House designers.

In addition to the client and design team, the elected members of the Dacorum Borough Council and planners from the planning department have been involved in the planning pre-application process through pre-application meetings. Furthermore, the public engagement strategy of Westwick Row encompasses a wider range of initiatives that have informed the work of the Ideas Exchange. These initiatives are presented in the following section.

3.3 Wider public engagement and co-design

A wide range of methods and formats for public engagement has been used for the Westwick Row development process including a series of three public exhibitions, targeted sessions with direct neighbours to the site and school children, an online Commonplace engagement website, as well as three co-design “streams”: Ideas Exchange, Renters’ Panel and Collaborative Housing Group (TCE & TOWN, 2026). A number of initial engagement events were held in connection with the nearby large East Hemel development in collaboration with The Crown Estate consultation team. The Renters’ Panel and Collaborative Housing Group will be introduced here as they have been part of the longitudinal co-design engagement together with the Ideas Exchange.

Renters’ Panel

This group consisted of 24 members recruited through open invitations by leaflets in central Hemel Hempstead and targeted social media advertising. Majority of the group was selected from Sortition Foundations’ register of people, from a wider UK geography and who have experience with renting homes in suburban and “edge of town” locations similar to Leverstock Green, and who have previously expressed interest in participating in engagement processes.

Collaborative Housing Group

Potential future residents for the Collaborative Housing Group were recruited through various channels including participants in an earlier feasibility study for the site, promotion through the UK Cohousing Network and the cohousing scheme Marmelade Lane in Cambridge, as well as target social media advertising. Five introductory webinars from October 2024 were followed up by phone calls and one-on-one meetings with interested households and a site visit in November 2024.

3.4 The Ideas Exchange

The Ideas Exchange was a demographically representative group of current residents from Leverstock Green. From November 2024 to November 2025—over the course of 12 months—the Ideas Exchange was part of the co-design process for the Westwick Row masterplan together with the Renters’ Panel and the Collaborative Housing Group.

In the fall of 2024 invitations to take part in the Ideas Exchange for Westwick Row were sent out to all households in and around the area of Leverstock Green. With explicit reference to the Citizens' Assembly (CA) format, the recruitment of members followed the sortition, or civic lottery, method to select 15 participants from 58 applicants, who demographically represented the population in the area. For the second phase of the sortition process demographic parameters were used to reach a broad representation. The parameters used were: Gender, age, ethnicity, tenure, vehicle ownership and geography.

The first session with the Ideas Exchange took place on 13th November 2024 at Leverstock Green Primary School in which the group was introduced to the project and asked to discuss a series of questions around the project in small groups. This first session was recorded using the AI-assisted tool Dembrane, which provided summaries and analysis for further discussion. In total 12 sessions took place with the Ideas Exchange including the in-person session at Leverstock Green Primary School on 8th November 2025 in which the group was asked to reflect on the process so far and a following Open Day event for existing and new members of the collaborative housing group. All members were compensated for each session with up to 750 GBP in total.

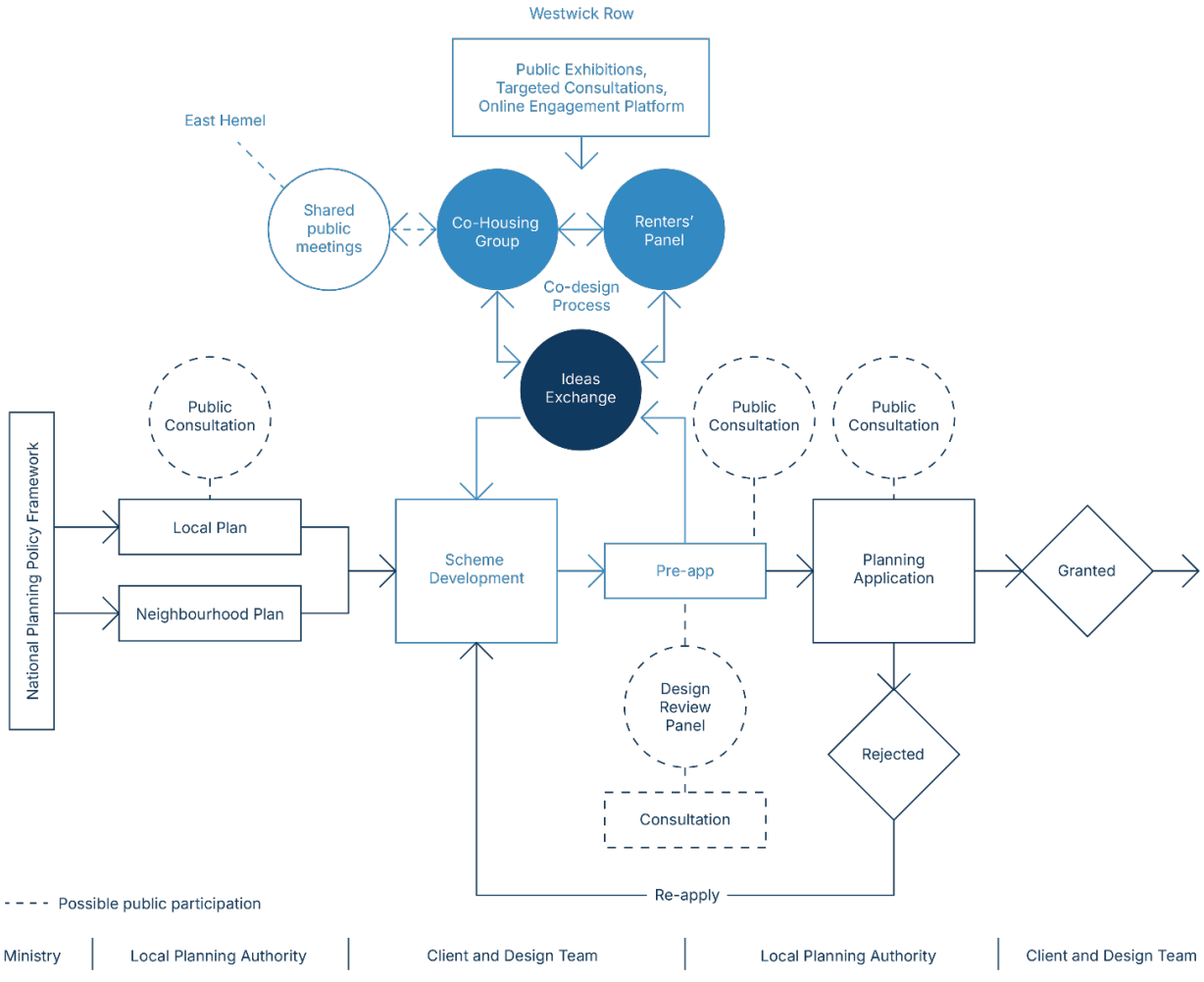


Fig. 5. Typical UK planning process adapted from Sarah Cummins (2021) with Westwick Row process. Gustav Nielsen.

4. Social value creation in the Ideas Exchange

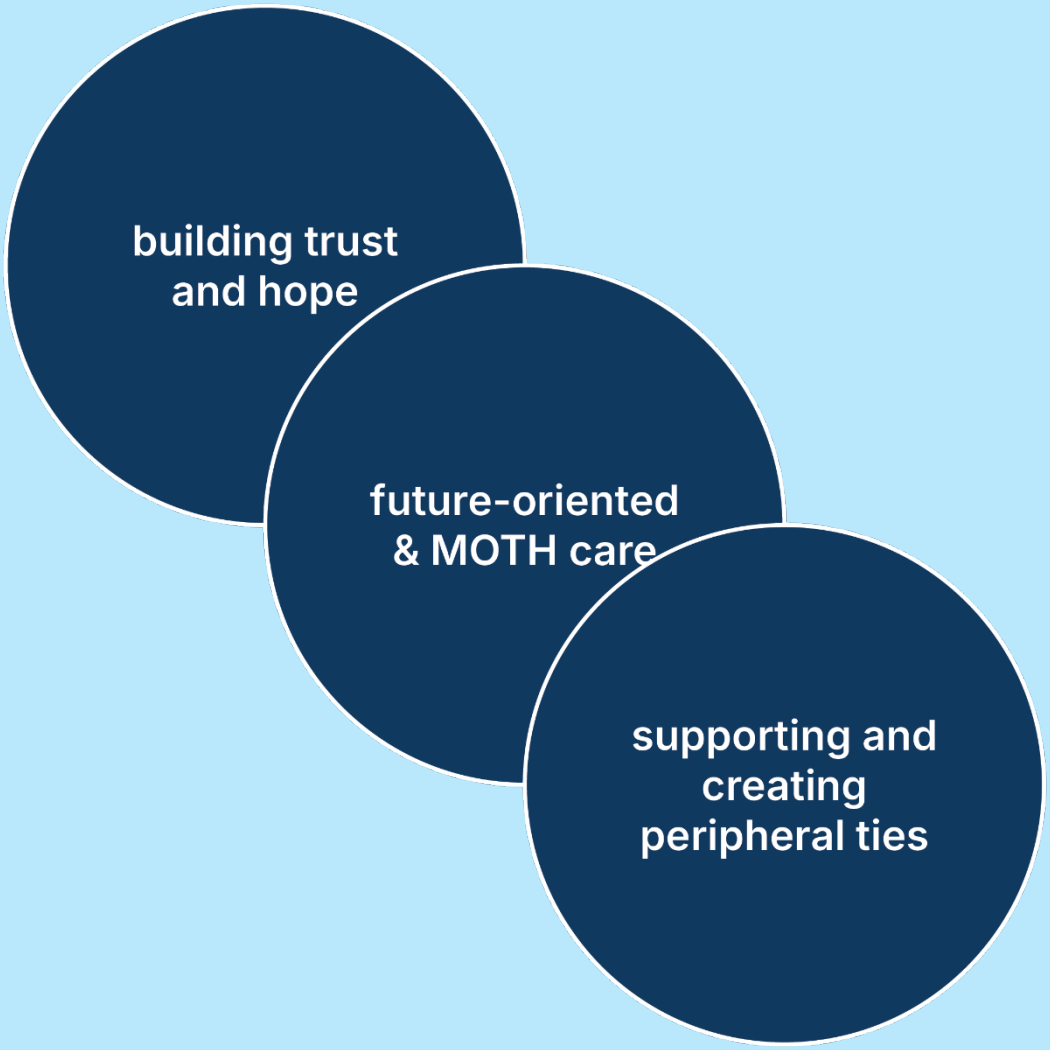


Fig. 6. Three themes of social value creation identified in the Westwick Row Ideas Exchange.

In this section we identify the social value creation of the CA approach to participation in urban development and planning through a closer look at the case of the Ideas Exchange for Westwick Row. The findings presented are based on a series of semi-structured interviews with 5 resident members from the Ideas Exchange, and 4 representatives of the client- and design team: the project architect from Periscope, the lead design consultant; a representative from The Crown Estate, the land owner; and two representatives from TOWN., the masterplan developer. The findings are further supported by observations from one public exhibition day at Leverstock Green Primary School, an in-person focus group conversation with members of the Ideas Exchange, and insights from two key documents: the *Design and Access Statement* (DAS) and the *Statement on Community Involvement* (SCI). We have identified three main themes which are elaborated in this section: Building efficacy, trust and hope; Nurturing future-oriented and MOTH care; Holding and catalysing peripheral social relationships.

4.1 Trust, hope and efficacy

Residents, designers, developers and landowners have developed a renewed hope and belief in their own and each other's ability to succeed in making positive change—efficacy—through a process which has built trust between all of the involved actors.

> *"I felt like I was contributing, which is hard to do when you get older."*
>
> **Participant A (Resident)**

While there are different understandings of what is meant by "positive change" the process has increased levels of trust in both one's own and others' intentions, capacities and agencies to make change. This was expressed as initial scepticism which changed to positive attitudes.

> *"I thought, 'oh my god, I'm gonna have a chance to hear from the horse's mouth, and they're gonna pay me', fantastic—win-win. But I've actually been quite surprised and I've really enjoyed it."*
>
> **Focus group participant (Residents)**

“If (...) my friends lived in the area, I think they would have taken the opportunity [to join the Ideas Exchange] because it’s quite cool to be part of something like this.”

Participant D (Resident)

Land owners, developers and designers expressed a change in perception of the skills and knowledges of Ideas Exchange members, who, when given the right circumstances to do so, were able to contribute both lived experiences, local knowledge and technical expertise to the design process.

“Meeting the Ideas Exchange on a regular basis also helped us to understand that some people are very confident in things we didn’t think they would be [like] sustainability (...) people can read plans!”

Participant G (Architect)

In the co-design process—in which deliberations were often facilitated around drawings and models—recommendations from residents fed directly into the design-work by the architects. This had a positive effect on residents’ perceived sense of efficacy, in that discussed changes could be seen in drawings presented in following sessions. This incremental implementation of recommendations also contributed to building trust because it showed that deliberations were actually being listened to and recorded.

Residents expressed an eager to participate in more engagement processes and become more active in their own neighbourhoods.

“I’ve enjoyed the process and it’s probably spurred me on to try and be involved in the wider East Hemel development.”

Participant E (Resident)

Similarly, the client and design team expressed a desire to pursue rigorous participatory planning processes in the future. The desire to participate in future co-design processes shows that all actors involved have trust in the CA-approach for planning. This is based on their experiences with the Ideas Exchange as well as comparisons to previous experiences with poorly designed public participation.

> *"It was quite a lot of extra work, but I think it was really fulfilling throughout the process to see members becoming familiar with you, the team and process."*
>
> Participant F (Developer)

In summary, trust, hope and efficacy was created in the Ideas Exchange as a result of a number of process design decisions that are specific to the CA-approach but also challenges some CA ideals. First, a long-term process with enough sessions—12 sessions over 12 month—for all participants to get well acquainted with each other. Second, a "mixed-member" assembly composition in which the recipients of the recommendations were present and directly involved in deliberations. Mixed member assemblies or mixed deliberative forums have been shown to have benefits such as added epistemic value and increased visibility and impact of the process while it imposes a risk of "elite domination" of discussions and decisions (Harris et al, 2023). Lastly, the format of deliberations centred around various probs such as drawings and models appear to have contributed to trust, hope and efficacy. While these props allowed for the incremental implementation of discussions in the masterplan design they also enabled a hands-on approach to learning about planning and design for the participants.

4.2 Future-oriented and MOTH care

The Ideas Exchange has contributed to residents building empathy for future community-members and natural environments and processes leading to a perception of the planning process as a practice of care. This is evident from testimonies that describe an initial self-interest which has turned into an interest in providing good homes for future residents with consideration for more-than-human elements like natural water-flows, various animal habitats and environmental impact of building designs and construction.

“Hopefully I’ve been able to add to the process for the people that are going to live there.”

Focus group (Resident)

The cross pollination of participatory processes have contributed to building an understanding of perspectives different from one’s own. Resident members from the Ideas Exchange have engaged with members of the potential future residents of the cohousing scheme in the development who were in the Collaboration Housing Group which has led to a care for their wellbeing and interests. One member expresses an interest in knowing more about what drives future residents to want to live in Leverstock Green.

“One thing I would have liked is understanding from the other groups that we’ve interacted with [co-housing group], what their real need is, why they want to move to this development.”

Focus group (Resident)

Other residents describe how they started thinking about their children and grandchildren—where they might end up living and how Leverstock Green should be a good place for them to live in the future if they want to live there.

“I’d like to do this [Ideas Exchange] because obviously my son is here and my granddaughter is here, and for them, it’s like the future.”

Focus group (Resident)

Some took the role upon themselves to share lessons from the Ideas Exchange with younger family members.

> *"I've got a son who wants to be some sort of engineer and it was quite an interesting thing to share with him actually—I never realized so much went into planning."*
>
> Participant C (Resident)

Through the technical knowledge gained in the sessions and the sharing of lived experiences between members, residents express a newfound care for the environment. An example is the water drainage question, which started out as a technical problem, but for some became a matter of caring for waterways and biological life.

> *"I got some insight into why it does flood [the neighbouring King Cup development] and I thought it was just run-off from the land. It's not. It's because there's a river that runs underneath the whole development."*
>
> Participant E (Resident)

In summary, two design decisions for the Ideas Exchange process seem to have contributed to building empathy and care with future generations and more-than-human actors. First, the overlaps between the Ideas Exchange and the Collaborative Housing Group has provided a link between current and future residents. Not only might this prove helpful to the future integration of the new residents, but it also shows that members of the Ideas Exchange have changed their initial self-interest towards a collective and future-oriented interest and care for future inhabitants and generations. Second, a landscape-oriented master planning process led by a landscape architect has forefronted challenges such as water management which has led members to learn more about both technical and natural systems.

4.3 Peripheral social ties

For the resident members of the Ideas Exchange sessions have provided a space for engaging in informal social interaction over 12 months with neighbours that they otherwise would not be in touch with. While the social relationships formed were not necessarily deep relationships—only one typically stayed for lunch after sessions—the importance of these "peripheral" social relations should not be underestimated. This too becomes clear from the interviews with the participants. The process has also catalysed new peripheral ties and ways of maintaining existing ones outside of the Ideas Exchange and all the residents express that it has been positive to get to know each other and understand one another's perspectives.

> *"I learned a lot more that's going on in Hemel as a whole because people talk and it's 'Did you know this? Did you know that?'—so I found it kind of like a meeting place for what's going on."*
>
> Participant B (Resident)

Importantly, most of the residents didn't know each other prior to the process despite living close to each other. Now they wave to each other in the supermarket or at the bus stop.

> *"I don't think I'd ever really met any of the people, even though they live in the same area as me."*
>
> Participant D (Resident)

> *"If I saw them in the street now, I'd say hello, but I didn't meet up with them or talk to them outside of the Ideas Exchange."*
>
> Participant C (Resident)

Beyond the internal social relations between the Ideas Exchange members the process became a talking point with neighbours and colleagues.

> *"I was able to tell people where I live—the community I live in—what was happening as well. So it's a bit like a conduit (...) I would feed back to them from the meetings."*
>
> Participant B (Resident)

In summary, the Ideas Exchange offered a space for holding and creating new peripheral social ties. It can be argued that the long-term duration of the involvement of the same group contributed to this process. Additionally, many of the residents referred to "the village" and the specific identity of Leverstock Green as separate from the rest of Hemel Hempstead. This share conception of place has likely provided a solid foundation for forming peripheral ties.

Today, we are losing ability to form peripheral ties and weak or transient social relationships which can contribute positively to quality of life and allow people to flourish (Fingerman, 2009). It is suggested that these weak ties—which are often unconnected or serve only specific social functions—can offer distinct social advantages in comparison to more intimate ties with family and close friends (Ibid.). These include direct physical and mental health benefits from engaging with diverse networks, access to and diffusion of information and knowledge that can lead to finding jobs and accommodations, as well as building personal social capital that can support access to resources. Other benefits identified from peripheral ties include opportunities to develop new understandings of self-identity and role in communities and stimulate curiosity.

5. Discussion & Conclusions

Significance, challenges and future practice and research

In this study we have found that the citizens' assembly (CA) approach to public participation in planning and development—studied here through the atypical case of the Westwick Row Ideas Exchange—fosters social value creation. In this case the social value created took three distinct but related forms as: *Efficacy, trust and hope; Futures- and MOTH care; Peripheral social ties.* These have been elaborated on in *Section 4*.

In this section we discuss the significance of our findings and their implications for practice, policy and research by reflecting on our new findings with findings from a previous study on the Hartree Ideas Exchange (Nielsen & Samuel, 2024). As an addition to the findings presented in *Section 4* we present a list of observed and perceived obstacles for social value creation. We conclude with a brief note on the limitations of this study and offer a series of recommendations for future practice and research which are presented in depth in the *Executive Summary*.

5.1 Significance of the findings: How do they compare to the *Hartree Ideas Exchange*?

Our findings suggest that the CA approach should be evaluated not only on its direct impact on plan or policy but also on its ability to create social value. They also suggest that social value creation sometimes depend on direct impact as exemplified in the creation of trust, hope and efficacy which can be broken in subsequent development stages if the group perceives their participation to have had no real influence. Conversely, we argue that the CA approach to participation in development and planning creates social value for participants and their communities even if the project falls through or changes significantly later in the process. This can be exemplified with the *future-oriented and MOTH care* and *peripheral social ties*, which can, according to the literature, contribute to quality of life and deliberative systems, therefore valuable for wellbeing and democratization outside the specific planning process. Significantly, the creation of hope and efficacy too can contribute to actions outside the specific project like participation in and initiation of other common good activities.

Comparing our findings from this study with the findings of the Hartree Ideas Exchange study (Nielsen & Samuel, 2024), we can detect similarities and differences. In the Hartree Ideas Exchange social value creation took four main forms: *capacity for citizen participation*;

Deepening and widening community relationships; *collective agency and efficacy*; *experimentation with citizen participation*.

In Hartree Ideas Exchange *collective agency and efficacy* stood out as a significant social value contribution. Similarly, we found *trust, hope and efficacy* to be important in the Westwick Row Ideas Exchange. In both cases an expressed cynicism or scepticism with developers and participatory processes was turned into positive experiences and a re-established trust and sense that one's voice was listened to and had an impact on design decisions. In our present study expressions of trust and hopefulness were more recurring while in the Hartree study concrete collective actions taken by members outside the Ideas Exchange as consequence of their involvement suggested values such as agency and a greater sense of collectivity.

While a deepening and widening of community relationships was significant in the Hartree study, this was less significant in the present study. This is likely due to the different approaches to recruitment scopes. With the Hartree Ideas Exchange, a proposal for 5600 new homes, members were recruited from multiple neighbourhoods and postcodes across North East Cambridge. As such the Ideas Exchange provided a space for people to get to know residents from other neighbourhoods and different place-based communities. In this study members were mainly from the same area, Leverstock Green, referred to by multiple members as "the village". Instead the Ideas Exchange became a space for catalysing and nurturing *peripheral social ties* with "unfamiliar neighbours".

Lastly, the Hartree study found that two significant forms of social value creation related directly to the participatory capacities and experimentations explored in the Ideas Exchange. Lessons from Hartree were expressed by all participants as contributing directly to future participation and innovation in participatory formats. This was also the case in our present study, however lessons were not acted upon to the same extent and was to higher degree directed towards *future-oriented and MOTH care* as well as other more technical aspects of planning and building.

5.2 Challenges for social value creation

In our analysis a number of perceived challenges for social value creation came up. These are presented here as additional findings that point towards aspects of the CA approach in planning which should be addressed by future practice and research:

- Loose facilitation – Facilitation techniques were loose by design compared to deliberative facilitation ideals. This meant that sometimes not everyone would speak and previous experiences with public speaking would benefit some. On the upside, the looser facilitation provided opportunities for members to support each other in speaking up.
- Scepticism about scalability – Can this kind of process also work on larger projects? This is a concern that came up in interviews and the focus group and seems to be rooted in a general awareness of the numbers of the specific project and other related projects in the vicinity. Specifically residents were comparing Westwick Row which aims to deliver 75 homes while East Hemel, the neighbouring development project, is a proposal for 4,000 new homes.
- Costs of homes – Pricing estimates were revealed at the event on 8th November 2025 and many of the Ideas Exchange members expressed that they were shocked about the prices.
- Unclear terminology – related to costs, the use of special terminology for housing appeared to still confuse Ideas Exchange members at the end of the process.
- Uncertainty about recruitment / sortition process – both members and design consultations expressed uncertainty about the recruitment process for the Ideas Exchange. This uncertainty might have effect on how participants relate to each other.
- Non-targeted written communication – It is mentioned by members that communication about recruitment for the Ideas Exchange could be even more clear in its audience especially mentioning that young people are able to join.

5.3 Limitations and recommendations

This study is short and limited to a single case and a relatively small sample of interviews. Further durational studies with more cases and larger samples are therefore needed. We suggest that future research focus on comparative studies between CA approaches and with other approaches to participation, as well as spatial studies of facilitation methods and deliberation practices. In the executive summary we list our recommendations for future research and use of the CA approach to participation in planning.

Finally, we argue that the *reach* of social value creation depends on relations of power externally to the Ideas Exchange and the CA

approach more broadly. The Ideas Exchange is an example of the use of the CA approach by private for-profit actors.

While the Ideas Exchange was part of an outline planning process, and therefore not part of a statutory consultation process, but rather a type of public engagement, it can be argued that the CA approach can be applied to other parts of the planning process where statutory public consultation often takes place. These include, but are not limited to, the development of local and neighbourhood plans and the evaluation of planning applications by review panels.

Taken together with the CAs convened by non-profit organisations, these are encouraging examples for further experimentation and open questions for further research such as: Who can convene assemblies? Who decides on the scope of the mandate? And who takes the final decisions?

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Appendix

What is a Citizens' Assembly (CA)?

The Citizens' Assembly (CA) can be understood in the context of the so-called 'deliberative wave' (OECD, 2020) or 'deliberative turn' (Floridia, 2018) which, since the 1980s, has re-introduced the idea of citizen participation in formal politics and policy-making through various deliberative formats, including but not limited to Deliberative Mini-Publics (DMPs) (Smith & Setälä, 2018)—hereunder CAs—deliberative polling (Fishkin, 2003; Mansbridge, 2010), consensus conferences (Andersen & Jæger, 1999) and participatory budgeting (Cabannes, 2004). It is suggested that the CA can contribute to a transformation of current representative democracies into "open" democracies (Landemore, 2017, 2020) and that they fall into an institutional and conceptual gap between formal politics of the state and informal politics of the public sphere (Brown, 2006).

The CA is a procedural mechanism which organises direct participation by citizens in political decision-making and agenda-setting through deliberative practices (Smith & Setälä, 2018). They convene 12-150 citizens, selected to broadly represent the population through a process of randomized stratified selection—also known as "sortition" and "civic lottery"—to learn, deliberate and recommend political action over a sustained period of time (Smith & Setälä, 2018). A report from the OECD has outlined 11 principles for the good practice of CAs: 1. Purpose; 2. Accountability; 3. Transparency; 4. Representativeness; 5. Inclusiveness; 6. Information; 7. Group deliberation; 8. Time; 9. Integrity; 10. Privacy; 11. Evaluation (OECD, 2020). Within the principle of "Inclusiveness" is the idea that participants should be paid. Remuneration amounts vary, but an example is the UK-based organisation Involve who typically pays a member £50 per day (Involve, n.d.). DemocracyNext (2023) suggests that three central principles of CAs are: participation, sortition, and deliberation (DemocracyNext, 2023), and while participation can't be said to be unique for CAs when compared to other participatory practices, the principle of remuneration and other efforts of inclusiveness support the emphasis on enabling

participation for everyone. Further, in addition to the process of selection through sortition, it is suggested that three core phases during the assembly process distinguish the CA from other participatory processes: learning, deliberation and decision-making (McKee & Pannell, 2024). In summary the CA can be said to distinguish itself on four key principles: Selection of members through sortition; time allocated for learning; weighing of arguments and opinions through deliberation; collective formulation of recommendations for decision-making. In the following we briefly elaborate these four principles.

Sortition

Selection through sortition is also known as “randomised selection”, “selection by lot”, and “civic lottery” and is a process in which there is an equal chance for all to be selected (Participedia, n.d.). This method of selection is an alternative to selection through “election”, “certification”, or “nomination” and aims to establish a group of people which are a demographically representative sample of the affected population (Courant, 2017). Practically this typically means that, in a first stage, every individual or household, within an area, which is deemed to have an affective interest, is invited to participate. In a second stage a stratified sampling of people, who have expressed interest in the first phase, is performed based on local demographic parameters such as age, gender, location, income, and education, resulting in a group whose demographic composition corresponds to the wider population. While the process is highly formalised through repeatable procedures it can take many forms in practice and is not without its practical challenges (Gąsiorowska, 2023).

Learning

In the early stages after the establishment of the CA, members of the CA are offered detailed information related to the issue at hand. This may include presentations and Q&As with experts, stakeholders and advocates (McKee & Pannell, 2024). The information should be “accurate, relevant, and accessible” and should ideally come from

experts and advocates selected by the members themselves (OECD, 2020).

Deliberation

Deliberation among members is at the heart of the CA. Group deliberation serves to find a common ground for collective recommendations and decision-making and this process entails both careful listening, weighing of arguments and multiple perspectives, as well as giving everyone the chance to speak through a range of facilitated formats which include both smaller break-out groups and plenary discussions and voting (OECD, 2020). Facilitation is critical for this process and is ideally not undertaken by the commissioning organisations (McKee & Pannell, 2024).

Decision-making

At the end of a deliberation process the assembly comes to a set of conclusions that are voted on and formulated collectively into recommendations (McKee & Pannell, 2024). Typically, recommendations that get 75%-80% support during a vote in the assembly are included in a final report which is handed over to the relevant authorities. In addition, if the recommendation is a legislative proposal, the assembly might get legal support to formulate in relevant technical language, and if three or more members are in support of a recommendation which does not get enough votes, they can be included in a "minority report" in the form of a short statement added to the final report (DemocracyNext, 2023).

In the UK the CA has been tried on various occasions at a local scale as with the three pilot assemblies supported by the Innovation in Democracy Programme (IiDP) and commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) and the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG). These included the Greater Cambridge Citizens' Assembly (GCCA) on congestion, air quality and public transport in 2019, Dudley's People's Panel on town

centre improvements in 2019, and Romsey Citizens' Assembly on specific area and bus station improvement. In 2020 the first national scale assembly, the UK Climate Assembly 2020—2021 and the UK People's Plan for Nature Citizens' Assembly 2022—2023 (IiDP, 2019). It is worth noting that the CA approach is also endorsed by civil society organisations like Extinction Rebellion UK who runs what they call "people's assemblies" within their organisation and advocate for the use of CAs "to empower people and communities" through their "third demand" led by their Citizens' Assembly Working Group (CAWG) (XR, 2024).

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