MHCLG Community Engagement Playbook

Discovery summary

This document provides an overview of the eight-week discovery we ran for the MHCLG Community Engagement Playbook. It includes:

- What we were trying to achieve through the discovery.
- The process for how we ran the discovery, including what user research we carried out.
- The key assumptions we wanted to test as well as what we learned.
- The key insights that came out from the user research.
- How we've shaped the playbook to address these key insights, and what they mean for the playbook going forwards.

Aims of the discovery

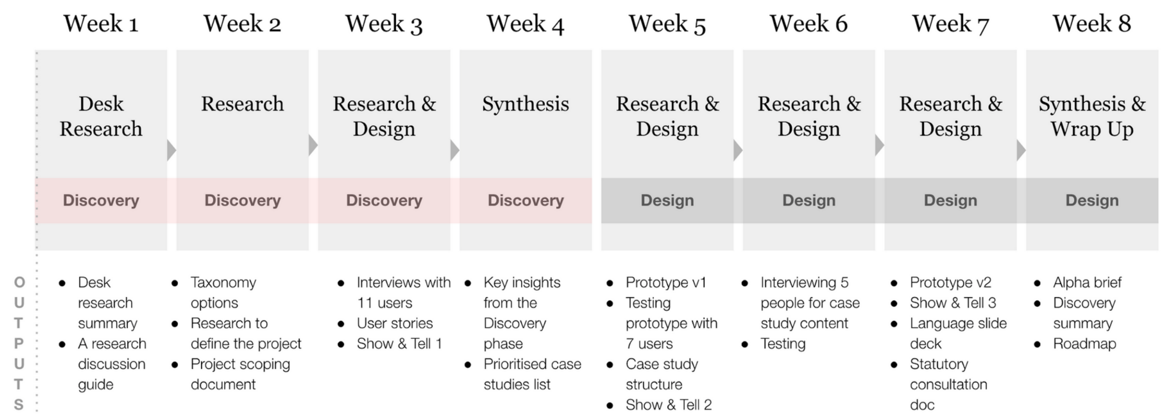
This discovery was designed to explore what a playbook that helped local authorities carry out community engagement might be. Throughout COVID-19, local authorities have needed to find new and different ways to interact, consult and engage with citizens, and a playbook could capture and share these new practices so that local authorities can learn from each other. To achieve this, the discovery had three main focuses:

1. Define the user needs that councils have around community engagement which the playbook would address.
2. Identify the local constraints that councils face when engaging with communities, and use these insights to build a taxonomy and case study structure.
3. Create and test a prototype based on user insights, to develop something tangible as a final output.

Project scope
During the initial few weeks of the project, the scope of the work was narrowed down to exclude any content around the planning process or digital inclusion, as both of these were already being addressed by other playbooks/toolkits (Inclusive Digital Place-based Engagement and Digital Inclusion). We also specified that the focus of the work should only be on engagement content or examples that have been done during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that we would exclude any non digital engagement case studies, unless these were directly linked to digital engagement examples. (Read our scope agreement created during the first few weeks of the project for more detail).

The process

Although this was a discovery project, we also wanted to develop a prototype to begin to test what a playbook might look and feel like in practice. This meant that the eight weeks were divided into four weeks for discovery before moving on to four weeks for design:



Desk research

We started out by doing desk research to understand what sort of practical support already existed for doing community engagement (see summary here). We also looked at other playbook examples to learn about the key elements that make a playbook successful (see summary here). This helped us to see where the gaps were, and to shape the questions we used in the user research.

User research and usability testing

We carried out two rounds of user research during the project. In round 1, we wanted to understand more about the challenges people face doing community engagement, and what support they would want from a playbook. In round 2, we asked for feedback on the playbook prototype we developed, and we also gathered content for the specific case studies we identified as most relevant to develop.

Who we spoke to	What we asked them about
Round 1 - Research	
11 people from 8 local authorities, in the following roles: • People working in engagement and/or communities teams in general. • People working on a specific engagement project.	• The reasons behind why they carry out engagement. • The specific barriers they face when doing engagement. • What content they'd want to see from a playbook. • Who they think the audiences for a playbook might be. • What format they'd like to access a

• People working within a service area whose roles include engagement. • People working in digital whose role includes engagement.	playbook in. • Any examples of good engagement they could share, or any pre-existing content on doing engagement well. View full discussion guide here.
Round 2 - Prototype testing and content gathering	
Prototype usability testing 7 people from 8 local authorities, split between: • Engagement specialists, whose main focus is engaging with residents/communities. • Generalists, who don't work in engagement roles but sometimes do engagement.	• Expectations of a playbook and the format it might take. • Expected content for a playbook. • Testing of the prototype in Figma to gather first impressions; what stands out, intuitiveness etc. • Presentation of two different prototype versions to gather feedback on taxonomy and ways of organising the case studies. • Gather feedback on case study structure, hierarchy and language. • Understand who the author/owner of a playbook should be. • Uncover any barriers to adding a case study to a playbook. • Explore reasons for sharing/not sharing a playbook. View full discussion guide here.
Case study content gathering 6 people from 3 local authorities: • Identified following round 1 research of having case studies that were good to develop.	• To build out the case study content so that it can be put into the prototype. • Main questions were loosely based around the case study template in order to capture all the necessary information. • To understand how they felt about sharing this sort of content on a publicly accessible platform. • To discover any barriers to local authorities writing their own case studies in the future View case study template here

For both rounds of research, we captured the raw data from the participant interviews in Google Docs. Key information and quotes were then transferred to a secure Miro board which allowed our team to easily analyse and synthesise the findings. Through this process, we uncovered common themes and insights that informed the development of the playbook.

Key assumptions, insights and actions taken

Before starting the user research, we created and tested a list of assumptions we had about the project. We also selected the key research areas that we wanted to understand more about from speaking with people. These were:

1. **Audience** - who should be the main audience?
2. **Needs** - what are the common user needs and user stories?
3. **Taxonomy** - how should the playbook taxonomy be structured?
4. **Format** - what format should the playbook be in?
5. **Content** - what style should the playbook content be in?
6. **Engagement examples** - which examples should we turn into playbook content?
7. **Prototyping** - how should the playbook look and feel?

Below, we go through the insights from both the assumptions and core areas, and what these mean for the playbook.

Assumptions

We validated and invalidated the following assumptions:

I. **That local authorities would find it useful to see and learn from what other councils are doing.**
   - **Validated -** the user research confirmed that local authorities do want to know about what other areas are doing, and that they'd like to know specific information, such as cost and staff required, to understand if it's something that they can replicate.

II. **That councils are capturing good examples of community engagement internally, and that this can easily be turned into content for the playbook.**
   - **Invalidated** - the user research showed that local authorities are not routinely capturing this information, mostly because of time constraints. This has meant that all content for the playbook has needed to be created from scratch.

III. **That local authorities lack the skills or experience to do more digital community engagement.**
   - **Partly validated** - while some local authorities did say they felt they lacked digital skills, others said they had good IT support and had been able to experiment with new technologies. The bigger barrier to doing better engagement was time and resources.

IV. **That an online tool would be most useful for users, rather than a PDF.**
   - **Validated** - the vast majority of participants in the user research said they would prefer an online tool, and that this would be easier to navigate and make the playbook feel like a living, evolving tool.

V. **There are new methods out there of how local authorities have engaged with**

the digitally excluded during COVID-19.
- **Invalidated** - while we only spoke with a handful of local authorities, they were all struggling with bridging the digital divide. We didn't discover any specific new practices, and most had relied on traditional methods such as posters or leaflets.

Key research areas

1. Audience: who should be the main audience?

The research identified two potential audiences for the playbook - engagement specialists, whose core role is focused on engagement, and generalists, who occasionally have to carry out engagement as part of their role.

To decide which audience group to focus on, we explored what would create the most impact. While getting the playbook in front of as many people as possible would build its reach, we felt the greatest impact would come from people who would be implementing the examples in the playbook. For us, this meant focusing on the engagement specialists - people who are thinking about and doing engagement on a day-to-day basis, and so have more opportunities to put the learnings into practice.

Crucially, we also heard in the interviews that these specialists frequently provide advice and support to other roles doing engagement. This means they can act as a gateway to sharing the learnings and practices more broadly, thus increasing the reach of the playbook.

What this means for the playbook
Success should be measured by impact rather than reach - i.e. the number of people implementing the practices in the playbook, rather than the number of people viewing the playbook (see suggestions on how to do this in the Alpha Brief).

2. Needs: what are the common user needs and user stories?

Using the Miro board with the insights from all the user interviews, we identified the common user needs and then developed these into a set of user stories to help guide us and shape what the playbook should do. We revisited the user stories from the original brief to do this, developing them to a far more granular level. We created 16 user stories in total, which were then prioritised based on how many participants had spoken about them in the user interviews (view all the user stories here). The top four user stories were:

As a council staff member doing engagement, I need to know how to *reach beyond the 'usual suspects' and engage with different groups so that we are hearing from a broader range of voices.*

As a council staff member doing digital engagement, I need to know about what digital tools are available so that I can understand what might be relevant for my work (and convince others of their value).

As a council staff member doing engagement, I need to persuade the council to open up and have more two-way conversations with residents so that we can improve our services.

As a council staff member doing engagement work, I need more time and resources to be able to do better engagement.

What this means for the playbook
We have used these stories to prioritise what content should go into the playbook (see case study section below), and going forwards they should continue to be used to decide what is the most relevant and useful content to add.

3. Taxonomy: how should the playbook taxonomy be structured?

Alongside the user stories, we took the user needs and what participants had told us they wanted to see in the playbook to begin developing a taxonomy. The taxonomy provides a scalable structure for the content within the playbook, and makes it easier for users to navigate through it. We also used the findings from the desk research conducted in the early stages of this project - which looked at evaluating existing playbook-like products and taxonomies - to inform the initial taxonomy and content structure.

Taxonomies are generally developed once the content is in place, as doing so without understanding all the content means a taxonomy might end up not being fit for purpose. For this discovery however, to ensure we had something to test and build from, we focused on creating a ‘light touch’ taxonomy based on the case study content we had gathered. We envision this taxonomy developing organically as the playbook scales. Taking this ‘light touch’ approach, rather than creating a rigid taxonomy, means the taxonomy can adapt to include any new relevant categories.

We developed two initial taxonomies to test with users:

Taxonomy A	Taxonomy B

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Based on the reason for the engagement.
Helping people find a route into the content by what they were hoping to achieve.
For example, ‘informing citizens’ or ‘collaborating with citizens’.

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A simpler approach that grouped the content under core headings we knew were important to participants.
This looked at grouping content under three headings which were:

‘Engagement activity’ (e.g. surveys, focus groups).
‘Engagement topic’ (e.g. climate, COVID-19).
‘User group’ (e.g. young people).

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<td colspan="2">Both taxonomies included a category on target engagement groups, as this was identified as one of the key needs from our research.</td>
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Through the user research, we learned that Taxonomy B was more popular with engagement specialists in the testing, with one participant saying that this version would help them “structure their approach [to the playbook] more”. It was perceived as being “clearer” compared to Taxonomy A.

We also believe Taxonomy B provides more flexibility to scale without consequences from the expansion. It allows for additional sub-categories within the three headings without affecting the basic foundation of the taxonomy. It includes a tagging system that can be adapted as the range of content in the playbook grows.

What this means for the playbook
We expect both the taxonomy and tags to develop as more content is added to the playbook, and so they will need to be tested further to ensure that they still fulfill the needs of, and make sense to, users.

4. Format: what format should the playbook be in?

Through desk research we learned that playbooks in the form of web pages were the easiest to navigate, maintain and read. They were also more likely to comply with accessibility standards.

In the first round of user interviews we learnt that most users wanted the playbook in the format of a website. This was for a variety of reasons, such as:

- Websites being easier to share with colleagues.
- A sense that content was ‘live’ and up to date.
- Websites were more scalable as content grew.
- Websites can make it easier to find relevant content.
- A centralised location would increase awareness of the playbook.

- Responsive websites change to fit the browser.

A couple of users did say they liked to access content in a PDF. However PDFs are:

- Bad for accessibility.
- Do not change to fit the browser.
- Hard to navigate.
- Less likely to be kept up to date.

For these reasons, we tested a Figma prototype of a website with users in the second interviews and they reported this was the format they were expecting. We have since built a prototype in the GOV.UK prototyping kit, which should be tested during alpha.

What this means for the playbook
The playbook should remain in the format as a website, but should be tested to make sure it meets user needs.

5. **Content: what style should the playbook content be in?**

The user research highlighted that there were two key types of practical content that users would find useful - best practice advice, and case study examples from other local authorities. We chose the case study for the playbook for several reasons:

- Engagement is very context driven and shaped by the group being engaged or the topic being discussed. The case study format means this important contextual information can be included.
- It also means important practical details can be included, such as specific costs or the staff resources needed.
- It's a quicker way to create useful content, as a case study is a standalone piece, whereas best practice needs to be built from multiple sources.
- It's more scalable, as many different types of useful case studies can be added.
- It doesn't require the involvement or sign-off of content experts, as the focus is on the experience of the practitioners who have carried out the case study.

The case study template we've created breaks down the process of the engagement into repeatable steps, and focuses on practical information such as key guidance and risks to consider.

What this means for the playbook
While we had positive feedback in our user research, the template should be tested further in the alpha stage to better understand if the categories and hierarchy of content fit the user needs.

6. **Engagement examples: which examples should we turn into playbook content?**

Through the user research, we collected 14 examples of how local authorities had been engaging with residents and communities during COVID-19. To decide which of these we should use to create example case studies for the prototype, we mapped each one against the users stories - noting down which stories they definitely met, and which they had the potential to meet once we had more information about it. This allowed us to select the three examples that met the highest number of user stories, ensuring that the examples were as relevant as possible.

What this means for the playbook
Going forwards, any new case studies should be assessed by how they address the user stories. This document includes all 14 examples we heard about and can be used to collect details of future case studies.

7. **Prototyping: how should the playbook look and feel?**

From the round 1 interview insights, we created a basic prototype of the playbook using Figma to test with potential users. We tested the two potential taxonomies, as well as the overall presentation of the playbook and the case study format.

To make sure we were putting the right amount of emphasis on the primary audience (the specialists) rather than the secondary audiences (the generalists), we created a spreadsheet to understand which features were preferred by which audience. This quantitative analysis allowed us to create a heat map of common insights and areas of improvements. For full details of these insights and how we developed the prototype, see the Discovery Insights log.

What this means for the playbook
The Alpha Brief and Roadmap give a detailed view of suggested next steps for improving the prototype.

Wrapping up

Our research showed that there is a genuine appetite from local councils to learn from each other, and that they experience similar challenges when it comes to carrying out community engagement well. This discovery has shaped the direction that the playbook should go in, and the Alpha Brief sets out suggested next steps for the project.