



HEATHROW
COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT
BOARD



Community engagement in major infrastructure projects: **rethinking how and why**

Reflecting on the set-up, successes and
struggles of the Heathrow Community
Engagement Board



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Foreword

An integral principle of the planning process in the UK is that communities are given an opportunity to have a say on developments that may affect them. But as acknowledged in **Planning for the Future**, the Government’s proposals for updating the planning system, too often “consultation is dominated by the few willing and able to navigate the process”.

On small-scale local developments, that’s frustrating and damaging to community cohesion. When it comes to major infrastructure projects, meanwhile, the consequences can be even greater. It can result in a feeling of overall disenfranchisement, with communities feeling they’re not listened to. But equally, experience shows it can also end up causing unexpected delays in development, plus additional costs, as communities resort to single-issue campaigns because their views were not heard at an earlier stage.

The creation of the HCEB

The need for more effective community engagement was one of the reasons why, when the Government announced its policy for the proposed expansion of Heathrow Airport in 2018, it also announced the plan to create a Heathrow Community Engagement Board (HCEB), tasked with ensuring that “local communities are able to contribute effectively to the delivery of expansion.”

I was appointed chair of the HCEB, and over three years, we led, facilitated and took part in a wide range of engagement activities around the proposed expansion and about the day-to-day operations of the airport. It’s been a fascinating, challenging and rewarding experience, and I believe we have achieved a great deal. We have successfully engaged many people in communities close to Heathrow who have previously had little or no say in the airport’s operations, and changed perceptions within some communities about how they might seek to influence planning decisions.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic brought a change in circumstances, with expansion plans now on hold and air travel dramatically reduced. This meant the HCEB’s role has had to change too, with a much reduced scope.



Learning from our experiences

Nonetheless, we believe our experiences and our efforts to reach previously unengaged communities can offer valuable insight for those tasked with similar responsibilities for future major infrastructure projects. This report is a record of what we have done, a reflection on the challenges we have faced and our recommendations, based on our learning, for more effective engagement in the future.

Focusing on the purpose of engagement

We believe there is a genuine desire at a political level to increase engagement, as documents such as Planning for the future demonstrate. However, our experience has shown there is a gap at the heart of conversations around engagement: a shared understanding of its purpose. Is the aim simply to keep communities informed, or to seek their views? To provide opportunities to input, or actively facilitate and encourage their involvement?

If the desire is, genuinely, to offer local people a meaningful opportunity to influence development in their area – and we as HCEB firmly believe that should be the case – then we need to work harder to make it possible for them to participate. That should be reflected in the channels used for engagement, looking beyond the traditional approach of formal meetings. Instead, there needs to be a more conscious effort to reach groups such as young families, students and those with limited mobility, including through making more effective use of digital channels.

Ending the one-size-fits-all approach

Similarly, more thought must be given to how information is made available and how people can respond. We have frequently seen the same technically detailed consultation documents being used for professionals and experts as for ordinary residents – immediately discouraging the latter group from participating.

This one-size-fits-all approach can also mean that the responses of a few well-informed individuals, often motivated by a specific issue, gain disproportionate emphasis as representing local residents. While the planning process must offer a legitimate avenue for anger to be expressed and particular topics raised, where these views are not counterbalanced by contributions from those who may be more ambivalent, they can be too easily dismissed as vexatious or eccentric.

Building confidence in the engagement process

We believe there should be opportunities for simple polls and unstructured responses; giving people the ability to input their views and voice their concerns without having to complete a lengthy document.

An independent engagement body can facilitate this, gathering responses to provide a consolidated view into a consultation. Such a role however must be carefully articulated, so that communities believe it is truly independent; as this report makes clear, this involves more than a name and strapline, but also issues like how the body is funded.

Above all, the engagement process and activities need to be open and transparent, with an emphasis on showing what people can influence. And where plans do change, it is essential to show where this is the result of local input: that will build confidence in the engagement process for all.



**RACHEL
CERFONTYNE
CHAIR, HCEB**

The HCEB: a timeline of our activity

2018

1 April:

Chair of HCEB starts (part-time). Begins introductory meetings with community groups and stakeholders



1 June:

Company incorporated



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18 July:

First HCEB forum with communities and stakeholders



2019



10 December:

HCEB mailout to quarter of a million households closest to the airport. Introducing the HCEB, letting them know about Heathrow's Consultations next year and seeking their views directly.

250,000

23 January:

HCEB Question Time Event, University of West London



31 January:

HCEB hosts Aviation Minister in Harmondsworth



28 May:

HCEB/Campus Industries hears views from students at Brunel University about the plans for the 3rd runway. Further events were held with students at other nearby universities



4 June:

HCEB visits Colne Valley to hear about the potential impacts of expansion on green spaces



18 June:

Heathrow opens its statutory airport expansion consultation





14 August:

Project on reaching unengaged communities starts



23 September:

HCEB meets residents at the Great Barn in Harmondsworth



9 October:

First meeting of the HCEB Board (monthly)



3 April:

HCEB presents findings of the December mailout survey to John Holland-Kaye



9 May:

Community drop-in sessions with HCEB Residents Adviser start (Colnbrook)



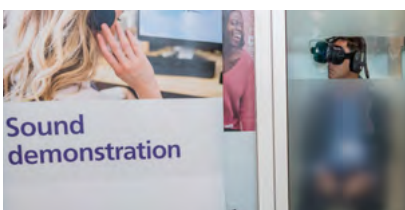
14 May:

HCEB workshop with young people testing the Heathrow expansion consultation website



21 June:

HCEB hosts Aviation minister in meetings with noise groups and small businesses



1 July:

HCEB starts work on its response to Heathrow Airport statutory Airport Expansion Consultation working with YouGov, Britain Thinks, Traverse, Temple, Campus Industries and Collingwood Environmental Planning



2 July:

HCEB sponsored community event at Beck Theatre, Hayes. Raising awareness of Heathrow expansion consultation



The HCEB: a timeline of our activity

2019 cont...

3 July:

HCEB's guide to public engagement planning (the public engagement tool kit) published



5 July:

HCEB organises for students to interview John Holland-Kaye, CEO of Heathrow Airport on expansion



6 July:

HCEB stand at Colnfest raising awareness of forthcoming consultation



September:

Representative survey of 750 people from YouGov panel across five selected local authority areas (Hillingdon, Hounslow, Slough, South Bucks, and Spelthorne)



3-10 September:

BritainThinks conducts interviews with local residents on Heathrow's proposals for expansion



3 October:

HCEB stakeholder roundtable event with **Directors of the Vienna Airport's Dialog Forum** and **Belfast's Institute for Conflict Research** on the art of building trust and reaching consensus

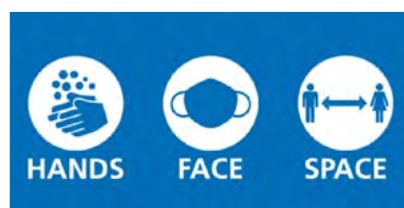


27 February:

Appeal Court delivers judgment in R (Friends of the Earth) -v- Secretary of State for Transport and others: Airports National Policy Statement, which set out the Government's policy framework in support of expansion at Heathrow Airport, has no legal effect. All HCEB expansion related activities are put on hold

16 March:

UK Government announces national lockdown in response to COVID-19 pandemic



3 June:

First HCEB Independent Forum (virtual)





August – September:

Outreach programme – attended festivals (including the Mela Festival) and events (including Indian Independence Celebration in Greenford and business breakfasts) and to raise awareness about consultation



12 August:

On-line survey opens to get people’s views about expansion. Work led by YouGov



17-18 August:

HCEB leaflets dropped to 33,000 homes in the Heathrow Communities inviting them to have their say in the consultation. Work led by BritainThinks

33,000



9 December:

HCEB presents findings of the December mailout survey to John Holland-Kaye at a joint meeting of the HCEB Strategic Advisory Groups.



20 January:

HCEB/Temple digital engagement platform goes live



2020

23 January:

HCEB publishes its Future Plans report



9 September:

HCEB releases new research detailing the economic impact of reduced activity at Heathrow Airport commissioned from Oxford Economics



7 – 8 October:

Supreme Court Hearing: R (on the application of Friends of the Earth Ltd and others) (Respondents) v Heathrow Airport Ltd (Appellant)

2021

13 January:

HCEB announces that it will be reverting to its former role as an airport consultative committee



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2 The HCEB: our role and achievements

In 2012, the Government created an Airports Commission to provide an independent analysis of how the UK could best increase airport capacity around London. In its 2015 final report, the Airports Commission concluded that the best answer was to expand Heathrow Airport.¹

The Airports Commission report also recognised that previous plans for expansion had been set aside in the face of local opposition. It therefore recommended that a new approach be adopted to community compensation and engagement – including the creation of a new community engagement board.

In 2018, the Government issued its Airports National Policy Statement (ANPS) which included provisions for the expansion, subject to full planning consent, of Heathrow Airport.² The ANPS confirmed the intent to set up a new community engagement board “to help to ensure that local communities are able to contribute effectively to the delivery of expansion, including to consultations and evidence gathering during the planning process.”

What we achieved: a more comprehensive understanding of the views of local communities

The Heathrow Community Engagement Board was duly set up in April 2018. Over a period of around 18 months of intensive activity, we reached out to over a quarter of a million households in the neighbourhoods around the airport.

We held a number of events, and attended many more. We brought together different groups of residents, sometimes with opposing views, and gave people the opportunity to put their questions directly to senior figures at Heathrow Airport Limited and in Government. We used a range of channels to gather opinions and share information.

We looked back, to understand why so many residents felt that Heathrow Airport Limited didn't listen to them and that existing engagement forums didn't represent them.

And we looked forward, engaging young people and students at nearby universities – historically overlooked by many engagement approaches – to seek their views about airport expansion.

The result of all of this was that we were able to present to Heathrow Airport Limited, and the various public authorities, a more comprehensive understanding of the views of local communities than ever before. We were able to bring important community perspectives to discussions earlier than had previously been the case, to feed into the development of plans, such as for the Community Consultation Fund, rather than to comment on plans that were already developed.



¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/airports-commission-final-report

² www.gov.uk/government/publications/airports-national-policy-statement



Perhaps most importantly of all, for the future, we helped change perceptions about engagement and made it more open and accessible for many.

What happens now: a new role in changing circumstances

Fast forward three years, and the situation looks very different. The issue of expansion has been scrutinised three times in court, culminating in the Supreme Court effectively ruling that there was no legal reason to prevent Heathrow Airport Limited submitting plans for a third runway. In September 2021, the Secretary of State for Transport announced that the ANPS would not be reviewed at present; in a letter to stakeholders, he provided a detailed explanation of the decision.³

Away from the courts, however, the commercial drivers for expansion have changed. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, activity across the entire aviation sector has dropped away. It remains unclear when, and to what extent, flight and passenger numbers will recover. Plans for the expansion of Heathrow Airport are now on hold.

That has meant, among other things, that the role of the HCEB has changed. There is no longer an immediate requirement to engage local communities to the extent previously envisaged in relation to expansion plans.

What can be learned: how to give communities a more meaningful voice

But while the expansion of Heathrow may be on hold, planning continues around many other major developments and infrastructure projects across the UK. The organisations driving these projects have a duty to engage the communities around them. Some are doing so effectively; others are aware that they are unable to be as inclusive in their engagement as they wish.

It is in this context that we believe it is valuable to reflect on the work of the HCEB, its success and challenges. More importantly, we want to draw on those to identify what can be learned from our experience to enhance engagement around future major infrastructure projects.

This report sets out what we achieved, and what we hope can be learned from it. It's structured around some of the key questions we've had to answer along the way.

- What is the purpose of community engagement?
- Who should be doing it?
- How should it be funded?
- What is effective engagement?
- How do you measure success?

³ See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1015207/decision-on-requests-to-review-the-anps.pdf

3 What is the purpose of community engagement?

In some ways, this is a question we shouldn't need to ask. But over three years after we began our work, we still feel that there are two fundamentally different responses to this.

- The first, and by far the easier to fulfil, is to **provide opportunities for communities to have their say on a major infrastructure project.**
- The second, more complex answer is that engagement should **directly facilitate or encourage participation, so communities can shape developments.**

In our view, the majority of engagement approaches fall into the former category, and are rooted in a tacit assumption that if people care about a project, they will respond. There's a certain validity to this. The developer publishes information, then offers communities a chance to view the information and comment. It is then the choice of community members whether they engage. But this argument misses several points.

The limitations of much current engagement

Firstly, much engagement activity is far from engaging. Events take place at inconvenient times and inaccessible locations. Members of the public are asked to respond to often complex technical detail, in formats that require them to answer dozens of questions on which they may not have a view, simply so they can register their opinion on the one issue that matters to them. It's no surprise that many feel unqualified to take part, while for others, the practical barriers to participation are too high to bother with.

Secondly, the current approach too often ends up disproportionately focused on the concerns of a few angry or dissatisfied local residents and campaigners. These individuals are typically passionate about a particular cause and their voice is a legitimate one. But in our experience, there is a real risk that these highly vocal campaigners can drown out the views of others.





Because they are active and passionate, they attend more meetings. They are likely to understand the process and how they can have their say.

Because they are often openly critical of the developer and the plans, harnessing social media to gain support, they become a focal point for the developer's engagement activity.

Because they have acquired a deep knowledge of the issue they care about, they can – unwittingly – appear intimidating to less experienced, less confident or simply less strident members of the community. These latter community members feel the meetings are not for them and disengage. Over time, and despite what may be well have been the best of intentions, meetings become less and less demographically representative.

Of course, engaging with the more active citizens is essential for a project to progress. But focusing solely on those who are already engaged for whatever

reason risks missing a broader opportunity. It can mean the entire debate becomes concentrated on issues that matter only to a minority, while the majority feel excluded.

Changing the ethos of engagement


In our view, the purpose of community engagement should be to encourage and enable more members of the community to input into developments, to scrutinise plans and raise concerns. It appears from Planning for the future that the government shares this opinion. The document sets out the ambition to “give neighbourhoods and communities an earlier and more meaningful voice in the future of their area as plans are made, harnessing digital technology to make it much easier to access and understand information about specific planning proposals.”

But to achieve this, a different ethos is needed. Engagement must mean more than simply offering opportunities to engage. Instead, the aim should

be to actively facilitate people to get involved. That means preparing the ground long before a consultation opens: raising awareness of what's happening; assuring different communities that their views are not just valid, but actively wanted; making those opportunities to engage more accessible and, crucially, demonstrating the link between views being heard and plans being adapted.

Defining our purpose


As set out above, the HCEB was created as a result of the ANPS, but there was little detail about what such a board should be or do, beyond ensuring that local communities were able “to contribute effectively to the delivery of expansion.” When we sought to confirm the objectives behind the creation of HCEB, there were no answers. Believing our role was to engage meaningfully with a wider audience in relation to the proposed expansion, we wrote our own statement of purpose:



Our purpose:

HCEB Ltd will seek to ensure that Heathrow Airport’s key stakeholders have the opportunity to contribute to decision making concerning the management or administration of the airport, its operations and any proposed future development of the airport by:

- Fostering constructive relationships between Heathrow Airport and its key stakeholders;
- Promoting meaningful and inclusive consultation, dialogue and engagement, which informs decision making; and
- Scrutinising and challenging its plans and activities in respect of current operations and any proposed development (including airspace consultation and related activities), making recommendations for improvement.



Recommendation:

Agree a shared definition of community engagement

While our statement of purpose fitted our activity, we believe there needs to be a shared understanding of what the purpose of community engagement is. That clarity of purpose can then guide all of us – planners, infrastructure owners, engagement bodies, local authorities – in taking the right steps to make engagement effective. It can help inform decisions about funding; the activities we undertake; the lengths engagement should go to.

We therefore urge the Government, in finalising its response to Planning for the future, to put such a definition up front.



4 Who should be doing it?

If effective engagement means finding ways to encourage and facilitate participation from as wide an audience as possible, there's a temptation to suggest that engagement should be a shared responsibility among all the organisations linked to a major infrastructure project: the infrastructure owner, the developer, local and national government bodies.

But the reality is that major infrastructure projects do not exist in a vacuum. Often, they are the next phase in a long history of stakeholder engagement. There are often tensions between stakeholders and communities, and potentially conflicting interests. It is because of these difficulties that we believe there can be a role for a dedicated engagement body, to bring others together, collate and co-ordinate views expressed in different channels, and focus on engaging those that might not otherwise engage.

When we started our work, we were repeatedly told that “local communities don't trust Heathrow.” The lack of trust was highlighted in the Airports Commission report, as part of the context for setting up a community engagement board.

Who's already engaging?

Meanwhile, the ANPS noted: “a number of engagement forums already exist at Heathrow Airport”. The implication of the decision to create the HCEB as a new organisation was that these existing forums were not suited to the task of engagement around expansion.

Our approach was to make best use of existing channels – and the knowledge and commitment of the individuals involved – wherever possible. As one of our first tasks, we undertook a mapping analysis of these and found an incredibly complex landscape. Though all related in some way to the airport, they had very different remits and priorities.

Some had a direct connection to Heathrow Airport Limited, the company that runs the airport; others were adamant they should not. Some represented airport users, while others consisted of members of local communities. In practice, there was very little diversity across the groups and it was a challenge to understand how they represented a true reflection of the communities around the airport.





What can a new engagement body add?

We asked all of these groups, along with other relevant stakeholders, what they thought the role of a community engagement board should be, and received a wide range of responses. Some felt we should be a campaign group, opposing expansion; for others, the logical role was for us to take on the formal role of the Airport Consultative Committee (ACC) – the way most UK airports fulfil their legal duty to provide facilities for consultation.

Heathrow already had an established ACC, consisting of representatives from airlines, passengers and local resident groups, and it was agreed that, to help reduce duplication of activity, we would fulfil that role. This gave us a clear remit in relation to existing groups, as well as existing structures and processes for working with Heathrow Airport Limited.

We saw serving as the ACC as a way to give us credibility in engaging the wider community. It allowed us to provide scrutiny and challenge towards Heathrow Airport Limited, and demonstrate public accountability

Demonstrating independence

Despite this, it was often difficult to communicate to the wider community that we were not part of Heathrow Airport Limited. For some residents, the very fact that our name included the word “Heathrow” meant we were seen as representing them. That meant any mailings we sent were put straight in the bin.

We consistently sought to demonstrate our independence and were transparent around our actions, documenting and publishing what we did and what the outcomes were. We also differentiated ourselves from existing forums by actively reaching out more widely.

- We asked communities how they would like to take part in discussion around expansion. The responses helped us define engagement activities that these individuals could participate in, rather than relying solely on established approaches that were not suited to them. Immediately, that gave communities confidence that we would take a different approach, and showed we were listening to the responses.
- We sought to be visible at community events, reaching out to the communities rather than expecting them to come to us. Again, this helped change perspectives about who an engagement process was open to.
- We committed to try and answer questions from local residents about the airport, even where these were not directly related to expansion. Our central message was “If Heathrow Airport affects you, we’re here to help.”

Meanwhile, we left the majority of traditional engagement activity to Heathrow Airport Limited, which had the resources to undertake it.



Recommendation:

Clarify roles and responsibilities for engagement activity

Roles and responsibilities for engagement around a major infrastructure project should be agreed at the start between all those involved, to avoid duplication of effort and confusion among stakeholders. An independent body may be well suited to performing some roles, particularly if there is a history of tension between different groups. However, if existing structures can be revised effectively, this can save time and effort.





5 How should it be funded?

HCEB was funded by Heathrow Airport Limited. This direct funding gave rise to suspicions about our true independence: if an engagement body is funded by the developer, many naturally assume it is there to do the developer's bidding.

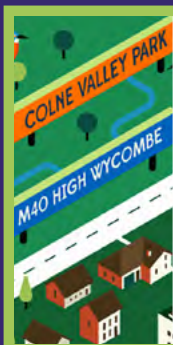
In reality, we had full operational independence and we were even constituted as an independent company, with a board of non-executive directors, including representatives of the community, to provide oversight.

But perceptions matter, and our funding reinforced for many the view that we were allied to the airport itself. The fact that the budget was negotiated annually didn't help; it gave the impression that if we were too critical of the airport operations, we could risk having our funding reduced.

We have examined alternative possibilities. One suggestion was that we should receive direct funding from the government: specifically, from the Department for Transport. However, given the government had already given its backing to expansion in the ANPS, the same fundamental concerns about our independence would have arisen.

Another suggestion was some form of levy on the applicant. This appears fair in many ways, but we would argue this should not be based on usage or annual calculations; to give an engagement body greater independence, the levy should be agreed at the outset, in conjunction with the Planning Inspectorate. The advantage of this approach is that it would give the engagement body greater control over its short and medium-term expenditure, allowing it to plan activities with more certainty and removing the time and effort spent in annual negotiations.

This is crucial given the additional costs likely to be involved if the purpose of engagement is to actively facilitate participation.



Recommendation:

Agree funding for engagement up-front

From the perspective of an engagement body, the most important issue is to have clarity about the source of funding and the amount – not just on an annual basis, but in the longer term. Agreeing a three-year budget (or longer) up-front would aid transparency and support the planning of engagement activity. It would also assist with the clarification of roles set out above.

What is effective engagement?

Over the course of three years, we conducted a wide range of engagement activities, and supported many more. We used different channels and approaches, to widen participation and overcome barriers to engagement. We successfully shifted perceptions, particularly of the value of responding to a consultation. This experience has given us an insight into what makes engagement effective. Our views are summarised below.

Effective engagement is diverse

A central part of our remit was to reach those who hadn't responded – and wouldn't respond – to the traditional engagement activities run by Heathrow Airport and other organisations... which in reality is the majority of people!

Our first step here was to understand the scope of current engagement. We looked at who was involved, to identify which parts of the community weren't, so we could then try to find out why not.

Through our own discussions, backed by research we commissioned, several themes emerged. While there were of course some people who had little interest or felt there was no value in engaging, many others were, or felt, excluded from traditional engagement activities for other reasons. These included:

- language barriers, not only among those for whom English was not a first language but also related to the widespread use of aviation and development jargon

- the times and locations of meetings – which were often not practical for shift workers, those with young families or those with accessibility needs
- a feeling that they weren't welcome at meetings, and that others wouldn't share their concerns or even listen to their views respectfully.

Our engagement strategy sought to address all of these issues. We took a deliberate approach of having an HCEB presence at community events, such as local festivals. This gave us an opportunity to talk to members of the community in an informal way, on their own turf rather than expecting them to come to us.

These events included the Mela in Southall and an Indian Independence Day celebration in Greenford, which were both part of our goal of engaging with the large Asian communities that live close to Heathrow, but have been historically under-represented in consultations.





Engagement Toolkit:

We also produced an engagement toolkit, with detailed guidance on strategy and tactics, which remains available for download <https://assets.fifty50.co.uk/hcebpet/>



Recommendation:

Engage people on their terms

- For all manner of reasons, too many people still feel excluded from consultation processes. To change that, those responsible for engagement need to be proactive in reaching out to excluded communities. That doesn't just mean ensuring they receive an invitation to your event, but attending theirs; understanding why they don't engage, rather than assuming they are simply not interested.

Effective engagement is focused

After an initial mailing to 250,000 homes in the areas closest to the airport, designed to raise awareness of HCEB and the forthcoming consultations, we adopted a programme of targeted engagement, focussing on different groups using relevant messages and channels.

Activities ranged from showcase events, at large community venues, to drop-in sessions over several hours at smaller local venues. These were opportunities to talk to our appointed residents' adviser about personal concerns that were not suited to raising in a mass meeting. We coordinated ministerial visits, so that community members could put their views directly to key decision-makers.

Anyone involved in engagement will be aware that evening meetings in community halls typically attract very few younger people, but given the issues under discussion and the likely development timescales for a project such as airport expansion, we believed their views were crucial. As well as using digital and social channels, we went into nearby universities, and also arranged for students to interview the CEO of Heathrow Airport, so they could put questions to him directly.

Effective engagement is about people

People are more inclined to trust people than organisations. So to help nurture trust, continuity of the people involved makes a real difference. If a different team shows up at each meeting, the community will question whether there is any ownership of their concerns, especially if the new team are not well-informed. Clearly, over a long term construction project, there will be turnover of staff, but this needs to be managed intelligently.

We addressed this not only through the continuity of our own team at events but by requesting the presence of John Holland-Kaye, the CEO of Heathrow Airport at our meetings to respond to questions. Our interaction with him – being able to push him for answers without descending into acrimony – reinforced our message of independence, but also impartiality. His open responses also helped build trust in Heathrow, in a way that was not achieved through the more formal or traditional meetings that he attended.



Effective engagement makes it simple

Our initial engagement activities had a specific aim: to raise awareness of us, of the expansion plans and the forthcoming consultation. With awareness built, we could then begin to focus more specifically on the issues and in particular the consultation itself.

Though technically open to all, the majority of planning consultations are not accessible for most. They are typically long and complex documents, including technical jargon and requiring a lot of time to read answer detailed questions. Given that responding to the consultation was one of our priority activities, we recognised we needed to find other ways to gather the views of the communities, so we could represent them within our response, rather than expecting large numbers of people to fill in the official response forms.

To that end, we combined quantitative research – surveys and polls, often around single issues – with in-depth interviews, conducted by independent research companies, with willing participants representing the breadth of local communities.

We also sought to develop a digital engagement platform, that gave people a greater ability to explore the proposals and understand the impact on their community, bringing them to life in a way that technical drawings on paper cannot match. This was launched in 2020, so we were not able to assess its full impact, but we strongly believe that – in line with the proposals set out in the Government’s Planning for the future – giving people access to such tools will have a huge impact on participation in planning processes.

Another part of our digital strategy was the opportunity to “pin” a comment on a message board, giving people the option to have their say on a topic that mattered to them without requiring them to complete the full consultation. <https://areal.templegroup.co.uk/HCEB/home/>

Importantly, we maintained some traditional activities, such as regular meetings and forums. However, we sought to widen participation, encouraging the involvement of residents who had engaged with us but hadn’t previously felt empowered to attend community meetings.



Recommendation:

Make digital channels a key component of engagement strategies

Consultations of course take place online, but all too often this simply means putting long documents, technical drawings and glossy artists’ impressions on a website. Digital channels today offer the potential to do much more, bringing plans to life in a way that means people can truly understand them, and enabling discussions and polls in a way that simplifies the response process. We would encourage those tasked with engagement to be ambitious when it comes to digital, as it will transform the depth and quality of engagement.



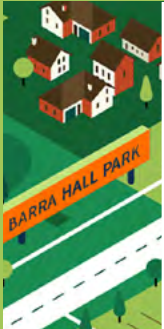
Effective engagement answers questions, as well as asking them

People’s priorities are often personal: they care about how their home or a favourite green space will be affected by a development. They want to know what it might do for their job prospects, or those of their children. Sometimes, what matters most isn’t what the area will be like in 10 or 20 years time, but what happened 10 minutes ago.

When it comes to engagement, these views and questions are as valid as any other. By responding to them, in an appropriate way, you can build trust in the overall engagement process – and ultimately, in the developer. That in turn feeds into a virtuous circle of engagement.

To that end, we not only used the input we received across channels to feed into our consultation responses. We also used it in other ways, to raise priority concerns and urgent issues to relevant authorities immediately and to signpost residents to other sources of help where appropriate.

Crucially, we also communicated the outcomes of any initial responses so that people could see that we were listening and that they could influence plans and decisions.



Be transparent:
Engage people on their terms

To build trust in the engagement process and in an engagement body, publishing information about engagement activities is essential. It enables participation, including holding the engagement body and the developer to scrutiny. And it’s the quickest way to dispel myths and misunderstandings.

Effective engagement channels expertise

In almost any infrastructure project or large-scale development, there will be an audience of people who are already highly engaged, whether in support of the proposal or against it.

As described earlier, at Heathrow Airport, there were a host of existing groups, many of whom had come into existence for reasons other than expansion. Some of those involved had professional knowledge of a subject; others had acquired a detailed knowledge through their years of advocacy. Our goal was to persuade these groups to be our allies – that is, supportive of our purpose – and use their experience in the most suitable ways.

Once we had set up strategic advisory groups, we invited them to join, where their additional knowledge and commitment would be useful to the more complex subject matter.

The HCEB's Transport, Environment and Noise Advisory Group (TENAG) for example, had a panel of experts whose experience and knowledge could be drawn on when exploring certain topics.

We also made sure they had access to key decision-makers in the same way as other community members did. For example, for one ministerial visit, we worked with the Friends of Harmondsworth Great Barn, to invite them to show to the aviation minister the potential impact of expansion on the heritage building they have lovingly cared for over a long time.

We committed to publishing expert reports and meeting papers online so that these highly engaged individuals could access them easily. This not only meant they were able to raise valuable questions, but also underlined our transparency, building their trust in us and our approach.



Showcase events: the benefits and challenges

During 2019, we organised two large community events, with very different formats. The aim throughout was to make it simple for local communities to understand the proposals, so they could respond to them in a meaningful and constructive way and help shape the plans.

In January, we held a “Question Time” event at the University of West London, with a panel including a local MP, representatives from the Department for Transport and National Air Traffic Services, and the CEO of Heathrow Airport.

We invited questions in advance, so that the discussion could cover a range of topics. Though it attracted a large attendance, the event was only a mixed success, with some members of the community feeling that the panel hadn't really answered the questions. However, it helped raise awareness of the HCEB.





In July, we organised a much more informal event at the Beck Theatre in Hayes.

We arranged food, entertainment and children's activities, to provide space for HCEB representatives to speak to attendees about the consultation. Throughout the day and into the evening, a wide range of people dropped in, enabling us to reach a more diverse audience than we had done to date.







8 How do you measure success?

We all want to know whether what we're doing is successful. For the HCEB, the challenge was there were vastly different expectations and views of what our role should be – which in turn meant made it difficult to assess whether we were performing it successfully.

Clearly, then, the first essential step in measuring success is agreeing the purpose and role of the engagement body – or engagement strategy. Then, targeted measures can be agreed with the applicant, the relevant government department, the Planning Inspectorate and key stakeholders, that reflects those aims.

In the absence of such agreed measures, we sought to define our own: looking not only at how many people provided us with their views, but whether we changed perceptions of a consultation process, whether we were able to raise issues effectively to Heathrow Airport and whether we had increased the diversity of responses. We saw progress in all of these, but of course the fact that the consultation did not take place limits our ability to demonstrate that impact.

More broadly, we also saw evidence that our work helped increase trust in Heathrow Airport, and its readiness to listen. This was not technically our objective, but the fact that we were able to challenge them, get answers to questions and push for action was

actually a real success for the HCEB, for Heathrow Airport itself and for the communities around it. There was, as noted above, a long history of distrust, particularly around previous infrastructure projects; while it would be overstating the case to say that relationships had been transformed, we did see the seeds of change. It is now up to Heathrow Airport itself to build on those, keeping promises and continuing to facilitate dialogue.

We have seen at first hand the benefits of doing so, in our discussions with the Vienna Dialog Forum, which engages with communities around Vienna Airport. But as the members of the Dialog Forum would reiterate, engagement is a process. It often starts with simply raising awareness, before people will trust you sufficiently to give their views. Then, you need a wide range of tactics to gather as many perspectives as possible, in an open way that minimises the barriers to participation. And crucially, you need to keep demonstrating the impact of that engagement. Whatever an engagement body might see as success, in the eyes of the community, the most important measure will always be whether their views are taken into account.



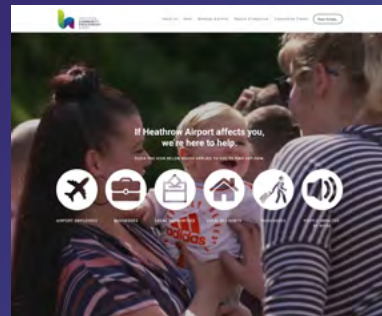
What next for the HCEB?

With expansion plans on hold, the role of the HCEB is necessarily changing. But the basic ethos – of active engagement, robust scrutiny and mediating issues between stakeholders – remains valid for Heathrow Airport. The relationships we have built are also invaluable, if Heathrow Airport is to nurture the increased trust that has developed over the last few years.

We are therefore pleased that, following a series of discussions between HCEB members and the airport, that these core functions will continue to be performed by an independent body, that is rebranded and refreshed with a new Chair. This body will have a broader remit than a conventional Airport Consultative Committee and, learning from the lessons of the last few years, will have a clearly defined role and set of responsibilities.

We wish the new iteration of HCEB every success, and more importantly hope that the relationship between Heathrow Airport and its many stakeholders can continue to improve, for mutual benefit.







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The Heathrow Community Engagement Board is an independently chaired body constituted to provide the functions of an airport consultative committee for Heathrow Airport (in accordance with Section 35 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982) and the functions of the Heathrow Airport community engagement board (as set out in the Airports National Policy Statement).

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