

Executive summary

QA Research (QA) was commissioned by Bridging NewcastleGateshead (BNG) to undertake a strategic evaluation of community engagement within the BNG area. Engaging local communities is of vital importance if the work of the Pathfinder is to be sustainable, and to ensure that its work reflects the housing aspirations and needs of local residents.

Report structure

To help target and direct our investigations, we developed a series of six key hypotheses. We then sought to validate or falsify these ideas through the course of the research:

- H¹** The views of those engaged have been fed into programme development
- H²** Opportunities for engagement have been provided in all areas of the Pathfinder
- H³** Opportunities for engagement have been provided for all groups in the Pathfinder area
- H⁴** BNG's engagement complements that of others working in the area
- H⁵** The BNG brand is recognised by the majority of people within the Pathfinder area
- H⁶** If residents have been engaged, their knowledge has increased

We have reflected this approach in all stages of our research, including our findings and recommendations.

Research methods

There were four key phases to this research:

1. **Desk research** to review existing literature
2. **Stakeholder interviews** to explore structures and delivery
3. **Resident survey** to establish how effective community engagement has been for residents
4. **Focus groups** to probe into the survey findings

We undertook 20 interviews with stakeholders: 7 with BNG Core Team staff, 6 Gateshead and 5 Newcastle stakeholders, alongside 2 respondents who operated across both authorities.

Our postal research phase captured a total of **392** responses; 63% from Newcastle and 37% from Gateshead.

The survey was designed to establish levels of awareness, support for the proposed plans and to establish whether residents felt they knew enough about planned changes. We then used four focus groups to further develop the information collected and develop our understanding of why respondents had answered the way they had. These were undertaken with the following groups of people:

- Residents aged 18-24
- Residents from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds
- General residents from Gateshead
- General residents from Newcastle

Key findings

Hypothesis 1: *The views of those engaged have been fed into programme development*

Input from residents engaged in consultation activities has clearly had an impact upon planned changes and improvements, for example, through Gateshead's neighbourhood planning and through BNG's own consultation on their strategic objectives.

BNG and their delivery partners have provided a range of engagement avenues to determine what should happen. This has led to residents, particularly those who are aware of plans to improve housing in their local area, being broadly satisfied with opportunities for getting involved. This suggests that existing routes for engagement need to be continued and expanded as needed, to ensure that all groups can access engagement opportunities as the programme is delivered.

As the programme moves into a delivery focused stage, maintaining a high level of community engagement and consultation is likely to require substantial resource commitment from delivery organisations. Close strategic partnership working is needed to secure ongoing financial support and to coordinate community engagement projects.

It is likewise important that the findings of consultation activities are fed back to the community, reinforcing the value of resident input.

Hypothesis 2: *Opportunities for engagement have been provided in all areas of the Pathfinder*

A range of consultation and engagement opportunities have been provided at a local and strategic level, with opportunities to participate being available in all areas of BNG, although efforts have naturally progressed to focus on engaging residents who live in strategic commission areas.

BNG should ensure that mechanisms are in place to meet residents' engagement and communication needs. This includes ensuring there is ongoing provision of innovative schemes, such as those with younger residents, where needed.

Who provides opportunities for engagement and consultation is likely to depend on the level of activities. For example, there is demand for more place specific information as changes are being delivered. This would seem to be the responsibility of the delivery organisation, but care should be taken not to divide or undermine the message from existing place brands. There is likely to be a coordinating role for BNG in ensuring that clear messages are being delivered through communication, whether this is directly being funded / delivered by BNG or their delivery partners.

Some residents living outside of the strategic commission areas demonstrate an interest in additional information regarding the programmes activities. We advocate that BNG continues to act as a signposting organisation for these interested residents, acting to point them towards relevant localised sources of information (e.g. delivery organisations).

Hypothesis 3: *Opportunities for engagement have been provided for all groups in BNG*

Overall, residents who are aware of plans are broadly satisfied with the engagement opportunities provided, which suggests BNG should continue to take forward a range of opportunities for involvement, reflecting what's going on at a local level. There is little specific guidance on community

engagement for the HMRP programme, although the DCLG has tended to guide Pathfinders towards Neighbourhood Renewal engagement guidance. As the rate of physical change accelerates and BNG's focus moves towards delivery, the nature of community engagement needs are likely to also shift towards information provision, rather than purely consultation.

Avenues of dialogue with hard to reach groups need to continue to be developed and sustained, with instances of good practice and expertise within BNG being shared through the Community Engagement Workstream.

BNG will need to continue to develop awareness of changes and improvements happening to housing, and ensure that they meet residents' expectations, to time, as this will affect willingness of residents to engage in the future.

Hypothesis 4: *BNG's engagement complements that of others working in the area*

BNG has developed strong, collaborative working practices with stakeholder organisations. This may help BNG to effectively use their lobbying power to establish who will resource communication and engagement activities in the future, given BNG's limited resources.

Emphasis should continue to be focused on promoting place and not who is delivering each specific change or improvement. This simplifies the message being delivered by a plurality of organisations operating within the same geographic area, and can positively affect the image of deprived neighbourhoods. This approach will necessitate continued strong collaborative working.

There is some consultation fatigue within BNG. To help combat this, BNG and delivery organisations should continue to capitalise on activities and events being held. 'Piggy backing' will help reduce the chances of over consultation and duplication.

Hypothesis 5: *The BNG brand is recognised by the majority of people within the Pathfinder area*

Overall, residents are likely to recognise either the name or logo for Bridging NewcastleGateshead. Most residents understand that BNG aims to improve housing so that people want to stay in the area and more people want to move in.

Conversely alongside this, residents are likely to think that BNG is responsible for more things than it actually is, such as improving local schools and employment. This demonstrates that whilst people understand the relationship between BNG and housing improvements, there is some confusion regarding the exact parameters of the programmes remit.

Hypothesis 6: *If residents have been engaged, then their knowledge has increased*

Awareness of specific programmes is high, particularly those which are at a more advanced stage where physical changes are occurring, such as in Sunderland Road and Walker Riverside.

In areas where physical changes are happening, some residents would like to see more intensive, place specific information made available, particularly in relation to what changes are occurring, timescales and how construction activities will affect them.

Overall, most residents have a 'background knowledge' of BNG yet do not necessarily understand what BNG is, and is not, responsible for. This may be leading to residents having higher expectations of the programme than will be directly delivered.

This could suggest that BNG needs to develop greater understanding of the programme's remit, or to ensure these other community expectations are also being addressed. This latter approach complements place branding, which reduces the need for residents to understand the remits of a range of organisations.

BNG and delivery organisations need to continue to focus on place branding rather than organisational branding. This will allow BNG to cast themselves as 'supporting' local activities and link local changes to wider strategic regeneration. BNG would therefore need to continue to promote awareness of the programme through newsletters, signboards and project officers, whilst coordinate local level community engagement undertaken by delivery organisations.

Key Implications

- Residents are broadly aware of BNG. This is a positive finding as it enables BNG to use their track record to give credibility to support newer local projects across the city.
- BNG and partner/delivery organisations should continue to provide a range of engagement opportunities, offered at both local and strategic levels.
- There is a need for place specific information, particularly as focus is shifting towards physical delivery. This should be provided by the organisation delivering change, but BNG needs to ensure the approach is coordinated and that activity does not undermine or weaken the message of related place brands.
- BNG needs to continue to be aware of managing community expectations in terms of what BNG, and delivery partners, deliver. Focusing on promoting place over delivery organisation will encourage agreement and collaboration between partners and simplify the message being delivered.
- Innovative methods need to continue to be employed and developed to reach traditionally hard to reach groups such as young people. BNG needs to use its lobbying power to ensure that its delivery partners are providing these opportunities, and can act as a link between delivery organisations and groups with the existing expertise and capacity to engage with these groups.
- As more physical changes continue to happen on the ground, there is likely to be an emphasis shift from consultation to providing information. Providing localised information would be appropriate to meet demand for area specific information. This could be achieved by splitting the 'Great Places' newsletter into a number of localised print runs, for example.
- BNG needs to avoid complacency. Current barriers are unlikely to remain fixed and BNG will need to keep developing understanding of what the latest barriers are, and must continue to effectively work with delivery organisations.