

BEYOND BRICKS AND MORTAR



A Creative Methods Toolkit for Community Planning

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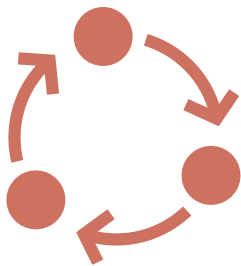
Cover image drawings and this drawing by Community Researcher, Nina May

TOOLKIT icons

TOP TIPS



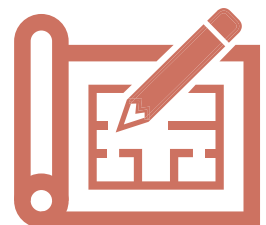
ACTION



CASE STUDY



ACTIVITIES



1. Introduction

Test Valley Borough Council (TVBC) places great importance on the role of community-led action in contributing to and being part of a strong, resilient community. When residents shape the ideas and initiatives that affect their everyday lives, towns and villages are better equipped to deliver inclusive and sustainable benefits that meet the needs of everyone. Gaining a real understanding of what matters most to all members of a local community is the first important step in community planning.

This creative methods toolkit has been developed by the University of Southampton in partnership with TVBC **to help communities identify what is important to them, work together to gather evidence, develop shared goals and plan for their future in a collaborative way.** It is also intended to support the process for communities who have already identified an issue and who might want to make a plan to develop practical ways to improve their area, such as through a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP), Village Design Statement (VDS) or other community led approach.

Once a plan is in place, effort can be focused on identifying the necessary resources required to tackle the issues raised by the community. The information collected using this toolkit can also be used to highlight matters to external stakeholders to seek improvements to infrastructure, services or the environment. Experience has shown that joint working between authorities and communities on community-led plans can deliver real benefits.

This TOOLKIT is for residents, parish and town councillors, community groups, community land trusts, local partnerships, community development teams and anyone who wants to understand the place where they live in Test Valley and beyond. It is a practical guide to using creative methods in community planning. It is designed to work alongside the Test Valley Community Planning Toolkit.¹

Creative methods are useful for community planning because they help people to think about the future. They make conversations inclusive, accessible and meaningful. They can also unlock information that could not be achieved through a survey or other approaches by encouraging deeper engagement with residents. This creative methods toolkit is rooted in an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach.² It suggests tools to help understand what matters to your community.

¹ Test Valley Borough Council (2025). Community Planning Toolkit. Available at <https://www.testvalley.gov.uk/planning-services/planningpolicy/community-planning-toolkit>

² García, I. (2020). Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD): core principles. In R. Phillips, E. Trevan and P. Kraeger (eds) *Research Handbook on Community Development*. Elgaronline pp.67-75 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788118477.00010>; Russell, C. (2025). Exploring the Potential of Community-Centred Public Services. *New Local* <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/community-centred-public-services-cormac-russell-stronger-things-2025/>

By using this toolkit you can:

- **Gather evidence** to support community-led planning and decision-making.
- **Strengthen trust and engagement.**
- **Help create a thriving community** by identifying what is important to people and what they want the future of their place to look like.

The creative methods chosen for this toolkit are easy to use, inclusive, and suitable for working directly with residents to co-create ideas and insights about the future. They were developed by the University of Southampton team based on research that shows creative approaches help widen participation and bring out local knowledge. They were tested during the *Beyond Bricks and Mortar Project* in Test Valley, which explored co-creation and participatory approaches to place-based decision-making and governance.³ The methods have also been used in other University of Southampton community projects, including *And Towns*, *Pathways to Health Through Cultures of Neighbourhoods* and the *Mansbridge Heritage Project*.⁴ These creative methods and the asset-mapping template also included in this toolkit can be used on their own or combined, depending on what you need. We encourage users to try them out and adapt them to help build a richer understanding of their community.

Together, these approaches create welcoming ways for people who may not usually take part in planning conversations to share their experience, ideas, and priorities. They empower communities to explore choices and imagine change in places where they live.

³ Sofaer, J., Awasthi, A., Parsons, H., Ryan, M., Bannister, J., May, N., May, P., Sargent, I., Walsh, J., Risley, K., Roberts, T., Somanje, C., Black, C., Leonard, N., Ramos-Bonilla, G., Nellikkal, M., Nisya, C., Trivedi, A., Brain, J., Stubbington, M., Spada, P., Woods-Townsend, K., Barker, M. (2025). *Beyond Bricks and Mortar. Results and Recommendations of the NxtGen Community Researcher Training Programme in Barton Stacey and Lockerley*. University of Southampton. <https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/507661/>

⁴ *And Towns* and *Pathways to Health Through Cultures of Neighbourhoods* project websites available at <https://andtowns.co.uk/projects/> and <https://www.pathways-to-health.org>

2. What You Can Use This Toolkit For

Communities are strongest when residents draw on their own experiences, relationships, and local knowledge to decide what they want for the future. Decisions work best when they are made by and for the people who live in that place.

You can use the creative methods in this toolkit to:

- **Capture** how people experience their local area, what makes places meaningful and strengthen the link between place identity and community planning.
- **Support** more rooted, community-led decisions by finding out what residents value and how they perceive their place, including what they think are important community resources, enhance pride-in-place, and understand what makes a place thrive and feel like 'home.'
- **Encourage** participation by rarely heard voices in decisions that shape the future of your place and create community connection.
- **Complement** and enhance traditional approaches to planning, consultation, and evidence gathering in flexible ways that allow residents to contribute their own knowledge and priorities, not just respond to top-down proposals.
- **Enable** joined-up working across themes such as heritage, housing, environment, culture, and wellbeing to support the creation of holistic place-based decision-making, rather than only focusing on infrastructure or services.
- **Inform** the development of community-led initiatives such as Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs), Village Design Statements (VDS), and contribute to Local Development Plans (LDPs), Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) principles and processes⁵ and local governance structures.
- **Sharpen** targeted neighbourhood-level investment by providing evidence of what is needed.

⁵ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2025) *Summary of the local government reorganisation process*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-government-reorganisation-letter-to-areas-invited-to-submitted-final-proposals/summary-of-the-local-government-reorganisation-process>

Glossary



Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)

A grassroots approach to community development that empowers local people to lead change by identifying and mobilising strengths, skills, and resources (assets) that exist within communities, rather than focusing on problems or needs.

Place-Based Decision-Making

A way of working that enables residents to play a leading role in shaping their area — informing planning processes, influencing investment, and creating better outcomes for all.

Place Perception

The emotional connections and meanings that individuals attach to a place. These attachments are affected by people's experiences of that place. Concepts like place identity, pride-in-place, community assets, heritage and community connection contribute towards place perception.

Place Identity

How a community understands itself in relation to a place. This is shaped by relationships, shared experiences, and what people value most about where they live.

Pride-in-Place

How people feel about where they live. It is linked to identity, belonging, and community life. It can be positive or negative and can change over time. Pride-in-Place means more than people's satisfaction with local services. It is about residents' felt connection to where they live.

Community Assets

The people, places, skills, spaces and stories that make a community unique and resilient. Assets come from within the community and are the foundation for positive change.

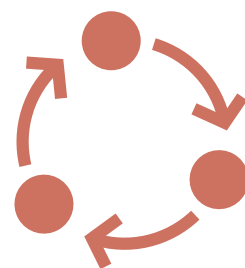
Heritage

Everything inherited from the past that continues to shape the present. It not only refers to historic buildings, but to people's lived and felt experiences, traditions, memories, everyday spaces and activities that hold meaning for residents and give meaning to a place.

Community Connection

The trust, belonging and shared purpose that grow when people participate actively in local life. Strong community connections support wellbeing, collaboration and collective action.

Use This Toolkit For



Developing Social Connection:

Strengthening relationships, belonging and shared purpose by involving diverse voices.

Fostering Trust:

Building confidence in local decision-making.

Empowering People:

Creating change, coordinating support and amplifying community action.

Collecting Evidence for Direct Intervention:

Generating robust, community-led insight that can guide decisions and inform investment.

Neighbourhood Planning and Renewal:

Using community knowledge to shape local development priorities in ways that reflect what residents value.

3. What Are Creative Research Methods?

Creative research methods are practical but flexible. They help people share their experiences, values and ideas through activities that are interactive, visual, collaborative and enjoyable, making it easier for people to express thoughts and feelings that may be hard to capture through surveys or other formal consultations. **They help communities say what matters to them and what they want for their future so that community planning is based on relevant priorities.**

When a place is seemingly shaped by one main story, it can limit how people imagine change or improvement. Creative approaches help open up new ways of thinking and recognise people's lived experience, ideas, networks and creativity as part of finding solutions.⁶

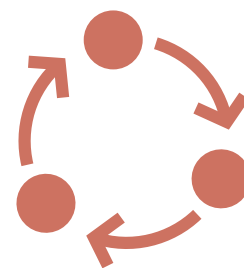
In this toolkit, we suggest six easy to use creative methods to collect information about the place where you live:

- **Design a Community Monopoly-style Board**
- **Personal Timeline**
- **Place Timeline**
- **Emoji Mapping**
- **Time Capsule**
- **Photo Prompts**

We also include a **template for mapping the assets** in your place.

⁶ Crossick, G. (2009) *So who now believes in the transfer of widgets*. Knowledge Futures Conference. London Goldsmiths.

Triangulation



To get a fuller picture of what residents think and feel, do not rely on just one method. **Combining methods can help you to understand your community better and make your findings more reliable.** This approach is called triangulation.

To triangulate, you can use the creative methods in this toolkit alongside:

- **Conversations and group activities** (also known as qualitative research): talk to residents in interviews, focus groups or workshops.
- **Surveys and questionnaires** (also known as quantitative research): collect data that can be analysed using statistics to identify trends or patterns.
- **A mix of both** (also known as a mixed-methods approach): use creative activities alongside conversations and short surveys for a combination of views.

By using more than one method, you can answer questions like:

- How connected do people feel to their place and to each other?
- What does pride-in-place mean to residents?
- How does heritage affect how people feel about the development of their place?
- What do residents want to keep in their place and what do they want to change?

Case Study



The *Beyond Bricks and Mortar* project used a combination of creative methods, interviews and resident surveys. Triangulating between them enabled us to understand what, how and why people felt about the place where they live and their priorities for the future.

4. Getting Started

4.1 Communication

Think about how you will let people know about your project so that they are informed and have an opportunity to participate. Consider using a combination of different approaches including social media, flyers and posters, or even going door-to-door. Not everyone uses digital media or the internet so word of mouth from trusted sources is also important.

Stakeholder mapping: This activity helps you think about who lives, works or has a stake in your area, and who you might want to involve. Having conversations with different groups can help you reach people who are often left out and build stronger relationships over time.

Working With Stakeholders



Through stakeholder conversations, you can find active community members to collaborate with 'on the ground'. In our *And Towns* work in Darlington, we connected with a food charity to engage people in one area of the town, where residents were traditionally reluctant to participate in local decision-making.

4.2 Where to Collect Information

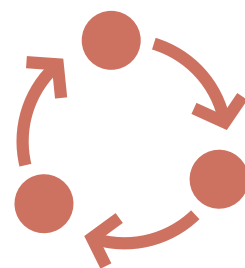
You can run activities, workshops or sessions in familiar places such as community centres, village halls, libraries, schools or faith halls, as well as in playgrounds or outdoor spaces where residents already spend time. Choosing where you collect information will depend on:

- What communities identify as important and frequent meeting places.
- How easy and accessible a location is for residents to attend.
- How communities understand their area. People's sense of where their community begins and ends doesn't always line up with official boundaries, such as parishes and wards.
- How communities are named or included in funding bids.
- How residents in a proposed area for redevelopment feel about the plans.
- How residents feel their area is perceived by others who do not live, work or have ties there.

Above all, people need to be comfortable and safe in the place where you collect your information.

Food

Provide water, tea and allergen-aware snacks appropriate to your community.



4.3 Informed Consent

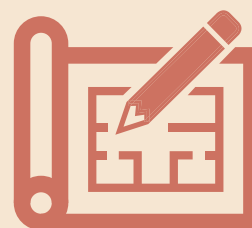
Before an activity, it is important to make sure that residents understand what they are agreeing to take part in. This process is called informed consent.

What you need to do:

- Explain the purpose of the activity in plain language: why you're doing it and how their data will be used.
- Make it clear that taking part is voluntary and they can stop at any time.
- Keep personal details confidential and do not share anything to identify someone without permission.
- If you plan to use quotes or photos, get specific consent for these elements.
- When working with children under 18, you must get consent from a parent or guardian. If relevant, get school permission. It is also good practice to obtain **assent** from young people if they can understand the information being presented.

CONSENT FORM TEMPLATE

(modify to suit your activity)



Name: _____ Date: _____

Activity: _____

I consent to: (tick all that apply)

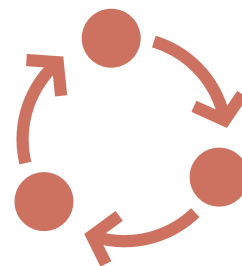
☐ Participation in [name of activity]

☐ Use of quotes anonymously

☐ Use of photographs

Signature: _____

Assent



If you are working with children who cannot legally give consent, it is important to obtain their **assent**. Assent is an agreement to proceed when fully informed consent is not applicable. Assent does not replace the need to obtain adult consent, but it respects young people's autonomy and development. Follow the same principles as for informed consent. You can modify the template to an assent form. Anyone working with children should be DBS checked.

Anonymity: People's responses should be kept anonymous so individuals cannot be identified. This helps protect residents, especially where views differ or where sharing opinions could jeopardise personal relationships. Some people may have personal stories and private views that they do not want made public.

In reports, comments can be included without naming individuals. If needed, a separate list of contributors can be provided without linking names to responses.

Data Management: Under data protection law, 'personal data' means any information that relates to and can identify a living individual. Personal data collected from your study should be used only for the purposes of carrying out your research and handled according to data protection law.

If any personal data is used from which a participant can be identified directly, it cannot be disclosed to anyone else without their consent. To safeguard their rights, you should use minimal personal data to achieve your objectives.

Safeguarding: If a participant discloses something that makes you worried or concerned for their safety or that of another person, you should contact TVBC's Safeguarding Lead at: safeguarding@testvalley.gov.uk

4.4 Language and Definitions

It is important that you and your participants understand the vocabulary of your work on community development. Clear, easy-to-use language helps to make sure that everyone understands the aims of your work. We have included some definitions in the glossary on page 7 to help.

Case Study



We found that terms such as 'pride-in-place' or 'civic pride' were not clear to many communities, who conflated these issues with LGBTQ+ pride.

4.5 Facilitator Skills

Facilitation of creative activities is vital for allowing voices from across the community to engage and for you to understand people's responses in real time. Listen carefully to local stories, notice unspoken community habits and use what you learn to shape decisions.

Work with residents as co-facilitators and make sure to thank them for and, if possible, reward, their input.

Facilitators Should Consider



Space and power: What does the space look like? Can it accommodate a suitable number of people? Arrange the room to encourage openness and equality. Circles, shared tables and movement can all help conversations flow.

Voice and confidence: Ensure everyone has opportunities to speak and contribute in ways that feel comfortable and inclusive. Those that choose not to speak can write or draw.

Clarity and accessibility: Introduce key terms in plain language and check shared understanding throughout.

Care and creativity: Foster a non-judgemental atmosphere where fun and experimentation are welcomed without pressuring participants.

Warm-up and connection: Use simple activities to build trust and ease before moving into the main task, this can look like a simple ice-breaker or short quiz.

Purpose and takeaway: Help participants leave with a sense that their contributions matter and will shape what happens next.

Case Study



Beyond Bricks and Mortar organised community days in villages in Test Valley. We advertised the days on village social media as well as through flyers posted around the villages and delivered to residents. On each of the community days we ran a range of different creative activities in the village hall. The community days helped to understand residents' perception of their places, including what they value and what they want to change for the future.

4.6 ‘Messy’ Fieldwork

Fieldwork (collecting information) is often messy and complicated. However much you plan and prepare, circumstances can easily change during your project. Residents could misunderstand what you are asking of them; they may no longer wish to take part; you may find that different methods are needed to obtain the information you want.

During fieldwork, there is value in **‘just being in the field’**⁷ using the time in places to both understand and reflect on the needs and wants of different communities. Through fieldwork, you will often learn how to better reshape your question and subject focus. You may come across unexpected sources of information or be surprised at people’s experiences and feelings about the place where they live.

4.7 Thinking Long-Term

Building a good picture of a community does not happen overnight. Talking to local people often shows how complex this work can be: mapping community assets, listening to people’s experiences, understanding what makes people proud, finding ways to measure it and making sure projects have a lasting impact. It also means securing funding that goes beyond quick fixes and short-termism. Villages and towns are complicated, so we need flexible approaches and patience when undertaking this type of engagement. **It takes time.**

⁷ Wolcott, H. (2004). *The Art of Fieldwork* (2nd edition) Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, pp. 57–78.

5. Asset Mapping

Asset mapping is a useful starting point from which to build understanding of a place by focussing on the facilities, community groups, institutions, services and events that exist there. Not only can it help to understand residents' views, but it can reveal hidden potential by identifying strengths, support better use of resources, improve decision-making and aid planning by showing locations, conditions and relationships between assets.

From an initial listing exercise, it is possible to expand on your identified assets through **experience mapping**, capturing their community scope and reach. These exercises can be conducted on a regular basis over a long period to meet the evolving conditions of places.

Asset mapping works best when you involve members of the community. Generating ideas together means that you can get a more rounded understanding of a place. Working together also creates new connections within a community and gives a sense of joint ownership, making it a better place to live.

Activity

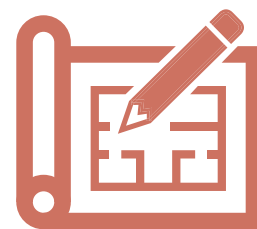
Example Asset Checklist (add your own!)



Spaces	Buildings	Services	Events	People
Public spaces	Schools	Health	Recurring local events	Local volunteers
Parks, gardens	Businesses	Recreational	Public holidays	Business leaders
Local landscapes	Residential-housing	Community-based	Fairs and festivals	Community activists
	Faith-based institutions	Children / youth groups		Creative thinkers
	Retail centres			Residents

Activity

Example Experience Mapping (add your own!)



Buildings

Schools

- Clubs e.g. breakfast club
- 'Care in the Community' kitchen facilities
- Afternoon groups for local residents
- Termly school fairs with input from community groups
- Second-hand 'swap shop'

Businesses

- Apprenticeship and mentoring opportunities
- Sponsorship of local events / teams
- 'Open day' schemes for local engagement

Residential housing

- Resident groups and local neighbourhood support
- Community rota for vulnerable residents
- Campaigns for green spaces / safe spaces for children

Faith-based institutions

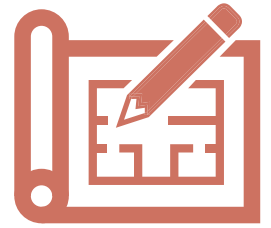
- Coffee mornings and 'open days' to welcome the local community
- Support schemes for homeless and vulnerable people
- Established networks for community initiatives

Retail centres

- Charity fundraising opportunities
- Hosting special events and public holidays / festivals
- Community activities in public spaces

Activity

Now Try Your Own Experience Mapping!



Activity Mapping

5

Diagram structure for Experience Mapping:

- Top box (Yellow): Main topic or goal.
- Five boxes (White): Sub-topics or activities, connected to the main topic by a vertical line.

6. Creative Methods for Community Planning

In this section, **we outline six creative methods that can be used to support community planning. They can be used individually or in combination.**

6.1 Design a community Monopoly-style board

What can you use this method for?

- To start conversations about planning, infrastructure, development or community priorities.
- To gather evidence that complements formal consultation by highlighting lived experience.

This method will help you by:

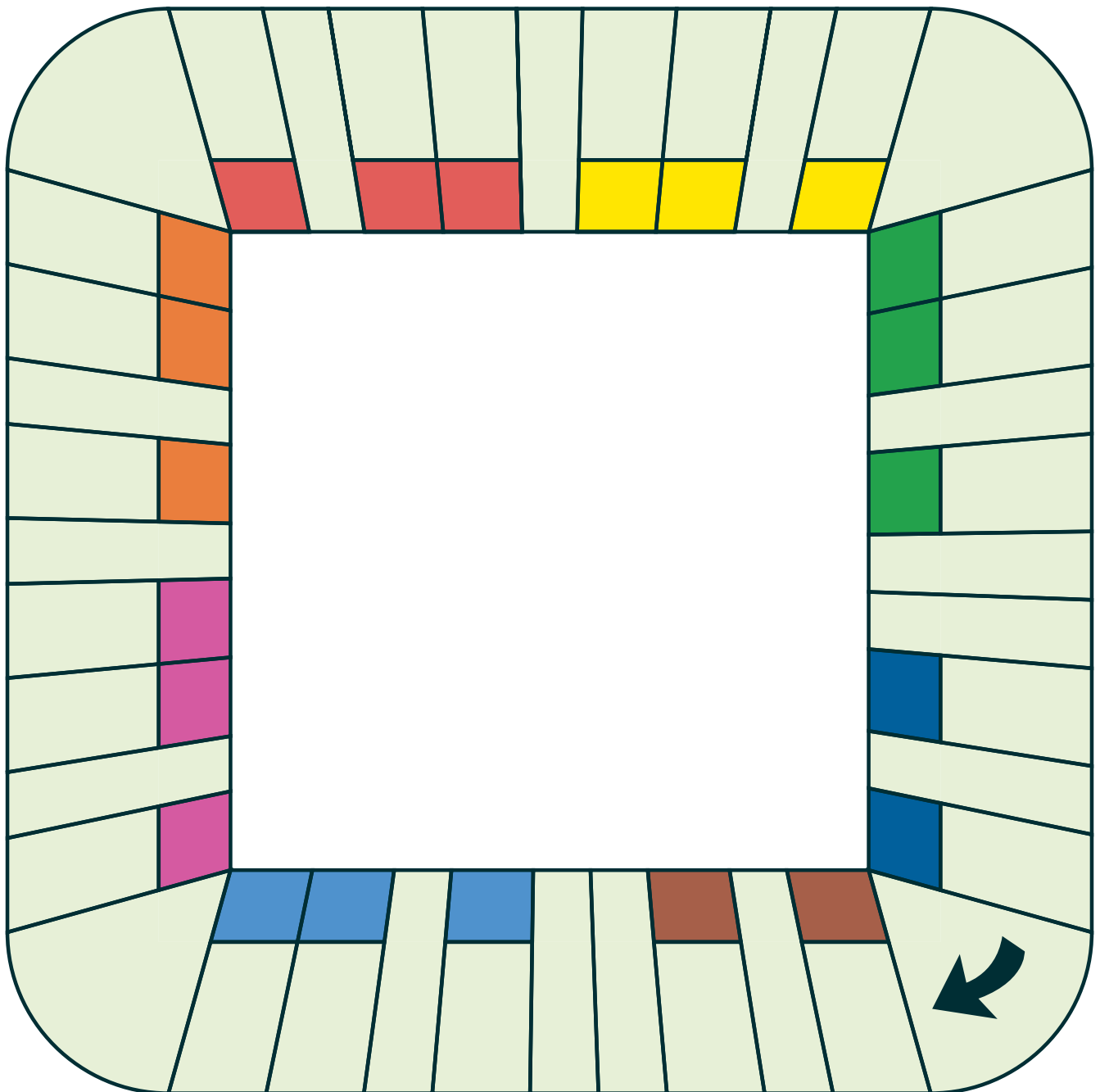
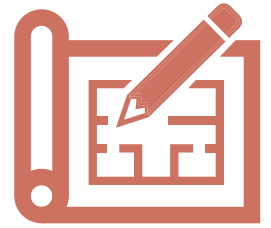
- Mapping how residents feel about different parts of the place where they live (emotional geography).
- Surfacing memories, frustrations, hopes and values connected to local places.

You will need:

- An A3 (or larger) printed Monopoly-style board with blank spaces that participants can label or colour.
- Sticky notes, pens, stickers or coloured cards.
- Space for people to gather (a hall table, pop-up stall or community event).
- Camera or phone to photograph the finished boards for later analysis.

Activity

Monopoly-style board



Instructions to use this method:

In this method you ask people to design a Monopoly-style board for the place where they live. Instead of buying properties they label the board with groups of locations or community assets in the place where they live.

Ask participants which places or community assets they would like to add and where on the board they would like to put them. Remind participants that the board has high value and low value places. Values increase clockwise around the board: on a traditional Monopoly-style board, brown locations have the lowest values and dark blue locations have the highest values. Participants can label the different locations on the board however they feel is appropriate and in whatever order they wish.

Benefits	Challenges
An easy, interactive and engaging approach for residents.	Can be time consuming, is limited in the number of participants per session.
Elicits rich data, especially when residents explain their choices.	It can be tricky to take notes on residents' explanations whilst facilitating. Having two people (one to facilitate and the other to take notes) can be helpful.
Good for small groups. Participants respond to others, leading to productive discussions.	Can be time consuming to analyse as it can generate lots of information.

How to analyse your data:

1. Digitise each board by photographing or scanning it.
2. Identify recurring patterns: Which colours or zones appear most often for positive or negative feelings? Which places are given the highest values and which the lowest? Are there shared 'anchors': assets given high value by several participants or shared frustrations?
3. Group comments thematically (e.g. infrastructure, community identity, lost amenities, belonging, memory).
4. Look for contrasts between different groups of participants: For example, are there differences between people of different age groups?
5. Summarise insights visually using simple posters, maps or bullet points to feed back to councils or communities.
6. Use the findings to identify assets that people value and want to keep, and what aspects of their place they think should be improved.

Case Study



Design a community Monopoly-style board has been used in the villages of Barton Stacey and Lockerley in Test Valley to help with community planning. Monopoly-style boards produced by residents reflected the emotional geography of their village. Contributions ranged from childhood memories and local campaigns to critical feedback on infrastructure, services and planning.

High-value zones were often used for community anchors such as shared outdoor spaces, rivers, schools and village events. Low value zones often became spaces of frustration (e.g. potholes, isolation, lack of buses).

Boards were digitised and thematically analysed, which revealed patterns of emotional attachment, social memory and aspirational value that often remain invisible in traditional consultation methods. These outputs were then turned into summary posters and shared back to residents and TVBC.

6.2 Personal Timeline

What can you use this method for?

- To identify what people feel proud of and what they are concerned about.
- To understand residents' hopes and aspirations for the future of the place where they live.

This method will help you by:

- Exploring how people understand the past, present and future of their place.

You will need:

- A long sheet or roll of paper.
- Pens.
- Space to carry out the activity.
- Camera or phone to photograph the finished timelines.

Instructions to use this method

Using a pen and paper, the task is to ask residents to identify moments when they felt proud of their local area, writing or illustrating these moments on a timeline. Ask residents to plot celebrations, improvements, and personal milestones alongside difficult periods.

Ask your participant to draw a line down a piece of paper. Ask them to mark their date of birth, or the date they moved to the place where they live, on the top.

Ask them to mark today's date $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way along the line.

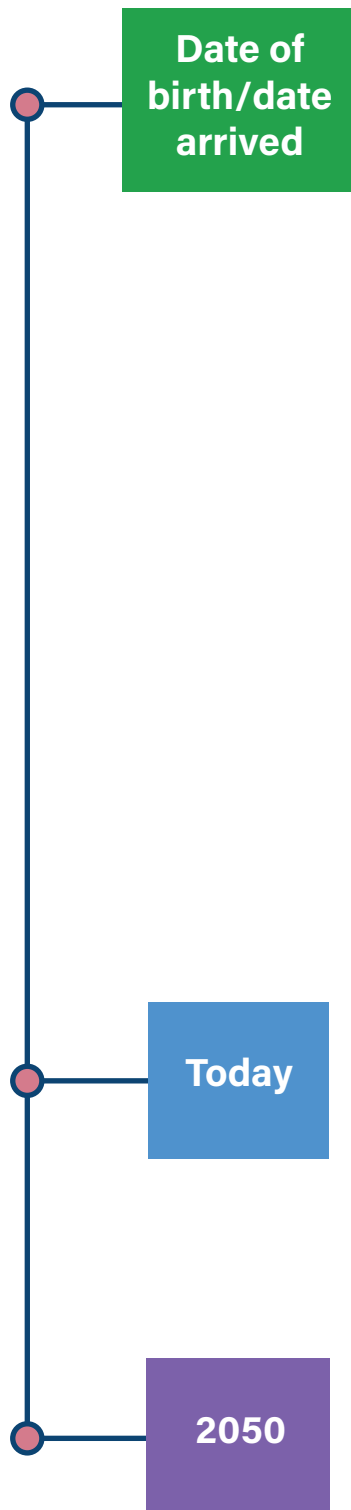
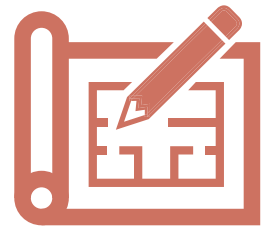
Ask them to mark 2050 at the other end of the line.

Now ask them to use the timeline to record moments when they had a strong feeling about the place where they live. Ask them to add one moment on the timeline when they felt proud of the place where they live. Ask them to add one moment when they had a negative feeling about the place where they live. They can use text, drawings or doodles, if they wish.

Ask them to add what they want the place where they live to be like in 2050.

Activity

Personal Timeline



Benefits	Challenges
Shows how participants' views and feelings develop over time.	Difficult to start and sustain in busy places with many people.
Allows for written and drawn responses to memory and place.	It is a time-sensitive method that requires focus and patience.
Encourages participants to think about and imagine the future.	Some people might struggle with dates and may have 'time-blindness'

How to analyse your data:

- 1. Photograph or digitise the completed timelines.**
- 2. Group responses into themes** (e.g. housing, community life, infrastructure, environment, services).
- 3. Identify patterns:** What moments generate pride, frustration or nostalgia? What do people want the future to be like?
- 4. Summarise the findings** in a description or diagram that shows how residents view the past and imagine the future.
- 5. Use the findings to identify what kinds of activities support positive feelings about place, what should be avoided and use ambitions for the future to set community planning goals.**

6.3 Place Timeline

What can you use this method for?

- To help residents reflect on their relationship with the place over time.
- To identify what they know about the history of their place and the role of heritage in place perception.

This method will help you by:

- Surfacing important local events, changes and turning points.

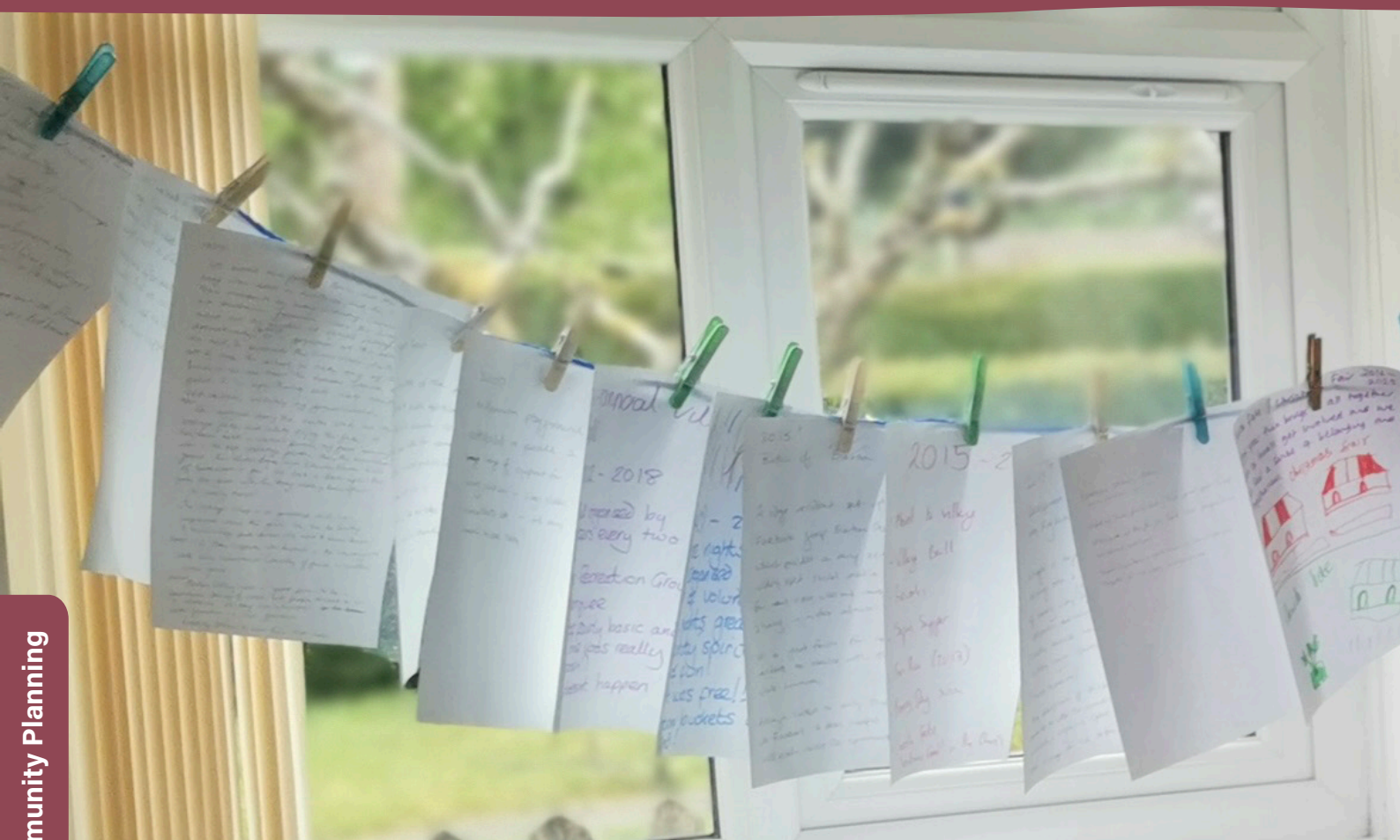
You will need:

- A washing line.
- Clothes pegs.
- Sheets of paper.
- Pens.
- Space to carry out the activity.
- Camera or phone to photograph the finished timelines.

Instructions to use this method

Ask residents which events they think ought to be included in the history of their place and the date it happened (this can be approximate).

Use the clothes pegs to hang up their response on the timeline.



Example of a place timeline

Benefits	Challenges
Brings heritage to life by sharing stories and local knowledge.	Can take up a lot of space in a venue.
Shows change at a glance.	Interpreting the data requires some understanding of the history and heritage of a place in order to understand how people's responses may or may not reflect that history and heritage.
It is possible to engage with a large number of people.	Can result in narratives of loss which are difficult to integrate into strengths-led asset-based community development.

How to analyse your data:

1. **Look for clusters or gaps:** Are there time periods with lots of activity or none at all?
2. **Identify how far back in time responses go:** Do people have shallow or deep understandings of the time depth of a place?
3. **Look for patterns in how people narrate their place:** Do they narrate their place in terms of loss (negative) (e.g. pub shut in 2001) or gains (positive) (e.g. football club opened in 2023)?
4. **Summarise the findings** to describe how residents understand the history of their place.
5. **Use the findings to understand how people perceive their place, what they think its strengths and weaknesses are, and how these developed.**

Compare

Compare personal and place timelines to see where individual experiences echo or diverge from the shared story.

Case Study

People who have a strong sense of the history and heritage of their place are more likely to have strong place attachment (an emotional connection between people and place including a sense of belonging and pride). Place attachment helps people to care for and protect a place. It is important to creation of sustainable communities and to a sense of wellbeing.

In our work we found that people who have recently moved to a place may have less understanding of its heritage than people who have lived there for a while. Using history and heritage to support residents' place attachment can be helpful in community development.



6.4 Emoji Mapping

What can you use this method for?

- To start conversations about lived experience in different parts of your place.
- Identifying places that may need improvement or intervention.

This method will help you by:

- Identifying places that spark pride, frustration, joy or concern.
- Gathering emotional responses to everyday environments.
- Highlighting 'hotspots' of positive connection or areas needing attention, such as locations where people may not feel safe.

You will need:

- A large map of your village, estate or neighbourhood.
- Emoji stickers (happy, sad, surprised, angry, love, etc.).
- Pens or sticky notes for residents to jot down brief explanations.
- A flat surface or display board.
- Camera or phone to photograph the finished map.

Instructions to use this method

Using a map of an area, the task is to ask residents to tag emoji stickers on places where they have a strong connection, memory or feeling, and to explain their reasons for doing so. Use the tagged maps to identify proud and problem areas. This activity works well in communal spaces or during neighbourhood events. It can also be left with instructions in a public or communal area such as a café so that people can add to it in their own time.



Benefits	Challenges
An easy, interactive and engaging approach for residents.	Emojis can be subjective and contain multiple meanings. Make sure that your participants agree on the meanings of each sticker.
Elicits rich data when residents explain their choices.	Requires the facilitator to be stationary; not easy on the move.
Participants respond to others, leading to productive discussions.	It can be hard to identify locations; some areas may not be included. Asking participants to write a specific place or comments on a sticky note can be helpful in identifying specific places and interpreting the map.

How to analyse your data:

1. **Photograph the completed map** so that you have a record of the map.
2. **Group emojis by emotion type** (e.g. joy, pride, frustration, safety concerns, sadness).
3. **Note clusters or concentrations:** Which areas attract strong positive feeling? Which areas show repeated negative emotions?
4. **Match emojis with written comments** to interpret what each sticker represents.
5. **Extract key themes** (e.g. green spaces as joyful, traffic areas as frustrating, town centre as mixed).
6. **Summarise the findings** to describe how residents feel about their place.
7. **Translate patterns into insights to inform planning, services or community priorities.** Use the findings to identify environments that elicit positive feelings and locations that require action or intervention.

6.5 Time Capsule

What can you use this method for?

- To obtain a snapshot about place-based values and identity for use in future planning or storytelling.

This method will help you by:

- Exploring what residents believe defines life in their community today.
- Surfacing shared values, cultural symbols and everyday assets people feel proud of.
- Prompting reflection on what is meaningful, unique or enduring about a place and should be recorded.

You will need:

- A prompt card or poster asking: *"If you could put one thing in a time capsule to represent your village / estate / neighbourhood today, what would it be?"*
- Paper slips or small cards and pens for people to write or draw their chosen item.
- A container to collect responses (you can decorate this like a time capsule).
- Camera or phone to photograph time capsule entries.

Instructions to use this method

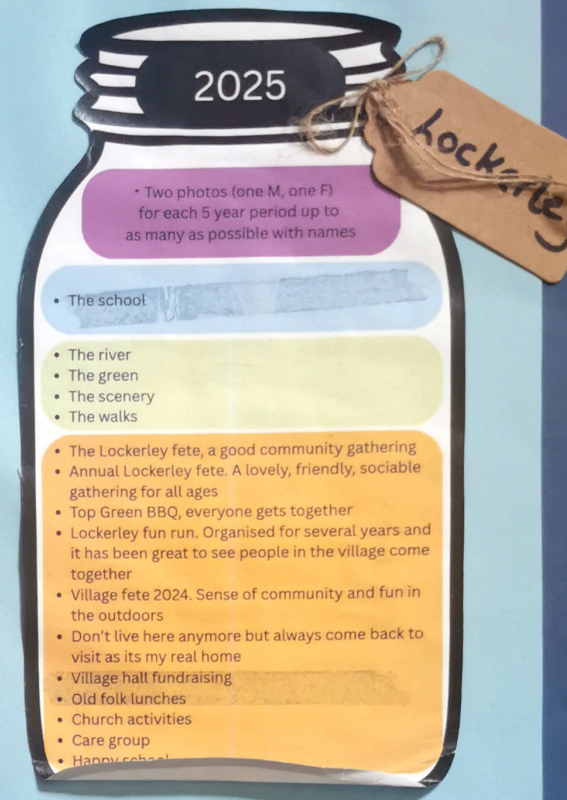
Ask your participant to imagine that they are putting together a time capsule for someone to find in the distant future. Ask what one thing they would include to tell them about your place. Ask them to draw or write their item on a card. Include a short note saying why they chose it. Ask them to put their card in the time capsule. This method can also be left with instructions in a public or communal area such as a café so that people can add to it in their own time.

Benefits	Challenges
Makes residents think about what matters most to them.	Some responses can be vague and broad.
Reveals priorities and values.	Responses may need some prior understanding of a place as they can be very place specific.
Quick and requires minimal materials. Lots of people can contribute easily.	Limiting respondents to a single item.

Village Time Capsule



Residents were asked to nominate an object to represent their village that they would want to put into a time capsule for people in the future to find.



Key

- Community spirit
- Important images
- Nature
- Community assets



What did the Time Capsule activity tell us?

- The choices made illustrated a great deal about what villagers value and are proud of.
- Both villages placed great importance on 'community spirit'. They were keen to capture how the villagers interacted with each other through traditional events, different organisations, people and memorabilia.
- Nature and community assets were included less often but both had a part to play in the maintenance of community spirit. Making them valuable in their own right as well as underpinning residents interactions.
- Residents wanted to 'capture' their villages at this moment in time (2025) through photographs, videos and documents. Demonstrating a desire to detail life now and contribute to the heritage of future generations.

Analysis of time capsules from Barton Stacey and Lockerley

How to analyse your data:

1. **Collect and digitise all responses** (photographs or typed notes).
2. **Group items into themes** such as community spirit, important images, nature, community assets, heritage or local events.
3. **Look for frequency patterns:** Which themes appear most often? What does this suggest about place-based values and identity?
4. **Identify unique or powerful items** that reveal deep emotional or place-specific cultural meaning.
5. **Compare across groups or places** (if running in multiple locations) to see similarities or contrasts in values.
6. **Summarise insights** in a short narrative or poster showing what residents feel is worth passing on to future generations.
7. **Use the results to identify what people want to see in the future of their place and embed these in community planning.**

Identifying Themes



Create a key using coloured stickers where each colour represents a distinct theme (e.g. community spirit, nature, community assets). Use the stickers to tag responses. If a response falls into two themes use both stickers. Count how many of each colour to identify which themes residents think are priorities for the future.

6.6 Photo Prompts

What can you use this method for?

- Identifying places that people value and want to keep.
- Identifying places that may need improvement or regeneration.

This method will help you by:

- Gathering responses to everyday environments.

You will need:

- Photographs of the place where you are working.
- A voice-recorder or a notebook to take notes on what people tell you.

Instructions to use this method

Using photographs taken by residents, the task is to ask participants to respond to pictures of their local area. You can invite residents to share photos of what makes them proud about the place where they live, and where they see room for improvement. Encourage people to tell stories about the places in the pictures. Stories and 'storying' (ways of telling stories) are fundamental to how humans make sense of the world: to understand who they are and where they fit in. People often have long-standing, intimate and emotional relationships with places. Stories and storying can reveal how these have been shaped.

Benefits	Challenges
A portable method that can cover many participants in a short time.	Can be difficult to show photos on a tablet in sunny or wet weather.
Pictures can provoke imaginative, detailed responses.	Requires careful curation of images to avoid repetitive data.
Useful tool for identifying key sites of regeneration in communities.	Showing run-down local areas can be overstating and insensitive.



Example of image used for photo prompts

How to analyse your data:

1. **If you have used a voice-recorder, create a transcript** (most voice-recording apps now have a transcript feature that will do this for you). If using an app, check the transcript against the recording for accuracy.
2. Highlight key words in the transcript to **identify themes**.
3. **Look for patterns in the ways that people describe each photograph**, whether they respond positively or negatively, and what they like or dislike in each.
4. **Compare responses between different images**.
5. **Use this information to identify places and their qualities that people enjoy, and to identify places in need of improvement**.

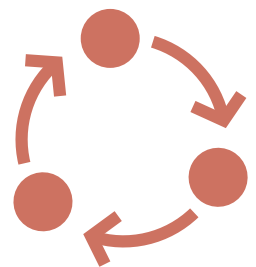
7. Sharing and Using Findings

You've engaged with residents and collected information. What's next? In this section we offer some suggestions on how to share your findings and use them to support community development.

7.1 Reporting back to residents

Close the loop: Report back to residents, showing how their voices have shaped priorities and decisions for the area. You can also use your findings to support ongoing activities or co-designed processes.

Sharing Findings



Share results and what you will do with your findings in different media (posters, newsletters, notice boards, social media updates such as WhatsApp or Facebook groups, drop-in sessions in community spaces) so residents see themselves represented.

This could include:

- Displaying maps, photos and timelines created during community engagement.
- Community notices outlining "You Said / We Did".
- Before-and-after photos showing improvements.
- Heritage walls featuring quotes, photos and stories.

Use local events such as village or school fetes as opportunities to share findings.

Creative Ways to Share Findings and Outcomes



There are many other creative ways of sharing findings and showing how they have shaped decisions. These include:

- Combining feedback sharing with social activities (e.g. coffee catch-ups).
- Storytelling sessions that share how resident input has shaped decisions.
- Photo stories that pair resident quotes with images.
- Mini-zines or booklets to summarise findings.
- Podcasts and films that feature resident voices.
- Interactive exhibit elements (e.g. sticky notes).
- Community artworks (e.g. murals, mosaics, collages) reflecting shared heritage and future aspirations for your place.

7.2 Using findings to develop community plans

Thinking about the future: Creative methods are particularly useful for planning because they help people to think about the future. Use your findings to identify what is important to people and what they want the future of their place to look like. Once you know what your end point is then you can 'work backwards' to identify and implement actions that will help you to get there.

You can use the information that you gather to form part of the evidence base of a community plan. This could be a formal plan such as a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) or Village Design Statement (VDS), or it could be another community-led approach to improving your place. You don't need to do this alone. Joint working between authorities and communities on community-led plans can deliver real benefits.

Once you have a plan in place and you know what you want to achieve, then you will be in a better position to approach funders or service providers.

7.3 Using findings for funding bids

Use your findings to demonstrate community need: When applying for community funding, you may be asked for evidence of need. You can use your findings to demonstrate this need, and that local voices have shaped your application and its goals.

Once you have been successful in your application, you can also use the methods in this toolkit to show the impact of your funding on your place. Funders want to see that you're thinking about the long-term, not just quick wins. Evaluation plans should tell the story of what is changing and why it matters. Strong evaluation makes your application more competitive and helps secure future investment.

7.4 Monitoring responses over time

Keep track of how residents feel about their neighbourhood and whether your activities are making a difference: Regular check-ins can help you to understand what is working and what needs more attention. Whilst the impact of some types of community planning can be felt quite quickly (e.g. improvement to infrastructure), other changes can develop slowly (e.g. pride-in-place, trust and community connection can develop slowly). There is often a tendency for community planning to focus on infrastructure because this can show immediate improvement, but feelings also matter for thriving communities. They show whether people feel proud of where they live, involved in decision-making and connected to their neighbours. By monitoring these feelings over time, you can spot improvements, identify challenges early, and show the impact of your work.

Case Study



Our research shows that the renewed emphasis on pride-in-place has made commonplace the monitoring and evaluation of residents' civic pride to evidence local government policy success. The creative methods in this toolkit support residents to interpret pride and other feelings about place in ways that are meaningful for them.

7.5 Collecting evidence of impact on other stakeholders

Gather evidence that shows the impact your work has had on other stakeholders: This might include ways that your information has changed their planning, practice or provision. Places are part of complex systems. What you find out could have implications beyond your original aims. Good relationships between local councils, the private sector and the wider community develop skills that feed into wellbeing, productivity and a better environment.

Finally...

We hope you have found this toolkit useful. By using creative methods to support community development, you can unlock deeper insights into residents' experiences, build trust, social connection and create stronger, sustainable places where people thrive.

The tools we have are still developing, and we are always looking for better ways to understand what really matters to communities. We would love to hear your experience of using this toolkit and what you used it for. If you have any feedback or comments about this toolkit, or would like help planning a community consultation please contact: neighbourhoodplanning@testvalley.gov.uk or your community engagement officer: communityteam@testvalley.gov.uk. They can also provide help and guidance on the Community Planning Toolkit.



Drawing by Community Researcher, Nina May

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