



**A Guide for  
Policymakers  
and Campaigners**

By Dr Dan Taylor & Dr Donna Smith



# ENGAGING THE DISENGAGED

## A GUIDE FOR POLICYMAKERS AND CAMPAIGNERS

Political disengagement is rising in the UK, marked by declining turnout, eroding trust, and growing polarisation. Some groups, particularly young people and the economically disadvantaged, are especially disengaged. Some choose not to engage due to a lack of trust in politics and institutions.

There are often good reasons why many perceive that mainstream politics is not working for them. Yet the consequences of disengagement are bleak: without widespread engagement in the political process, democracy becomes less representative, less effective, and more open to abuse and corruption. Different voices go unheard and become further cut out of political decision-making. Everyone suffers.

Reaching these groups is crucial for a healthy civic society, better policymaking, and a more representative democracy. Not reaching them leads to a slow doom spiral for democracy.

This toolkit provides some practical insights for policymakers and campaigners on methods to engage disengaged groups, drawing on recent Open University (OU) projects. It aims to give you and your organisation new insights into the barriers for democratic participation, and ways to engage the disengaged in making change.



### WHO IS THIS TOOLKIT FOR?

#### POLICYMAKERS

gain practical insights into barriers to citizen engagement to inform more inclusive and effective policies, based on a range of current OU projects

#### CAMPAIGNING GROUPS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

use practical strategies from current OU projects to better connect with disengaged communities and drive impactful change

#### RESEARCHERS

explore concepts and methods to understand and address barriers to political engagement among disengaged groups.

## DISENGAGEMENT IN NUMBERS

**59.7%**

turnout at the 2024% UK general election (lowest since 2001)

**40%**

turnout in Manchester Rusholme constituency in 2024 UK general election

**63%**

have 'little to no confidence that they have a say in what government does' (2023 survey)

**5%**

took part in a protest or demonstration in last year (2023 survey)

**1.8%**

population who are members of a UK political party (estimated)

**16%**

have formally volunteered in the last month (2023/24 survey; down from 27% in 2013/14)

# ENGAGEMENT

## WHAT IT IS, WHY IT MATTERS

People engage in politics wherever they seek to influence the decision-making processes that impact their lives. Political engagement takes many forms. There is formal political engagement, such as voting in local or national elections, being a member of a political party, writing to a local MP or other representative about an issue, or even standing for office. Then there is informal political engagement, such as taking part in a protest or boycott, online campaigns, community and grassroots activism and political expression through culture and art. In practice, it's blurry – many people do both, often, throughout their lives and at different moments.

### WHAT ABOUT DISENGAGEMENT?

Well, that's a choice that people make not to vote, not to engage with political parties or their local representatives. It's a choice people make not to take part in protests, campaigns, community activism or expressing their politics.

And it's a choice that may be grounded in a view that politics does not work for them, that they do not have any meaningful say in what government does. It comes down to a lack of trust in the political system to meet ordinary people's needs.

With UK party political membership at an all-time low, and voter turnout heading troublingly south, it's time to rethink when and where politics takes place, and to meet citizens on their own terms, in their own places and communities.

### RETHINKING ENGAGEMENT: TRIANGLES OF TRUST

In our work with marginalised communities across England and Wales, three key features of political engagement and trust stand out:

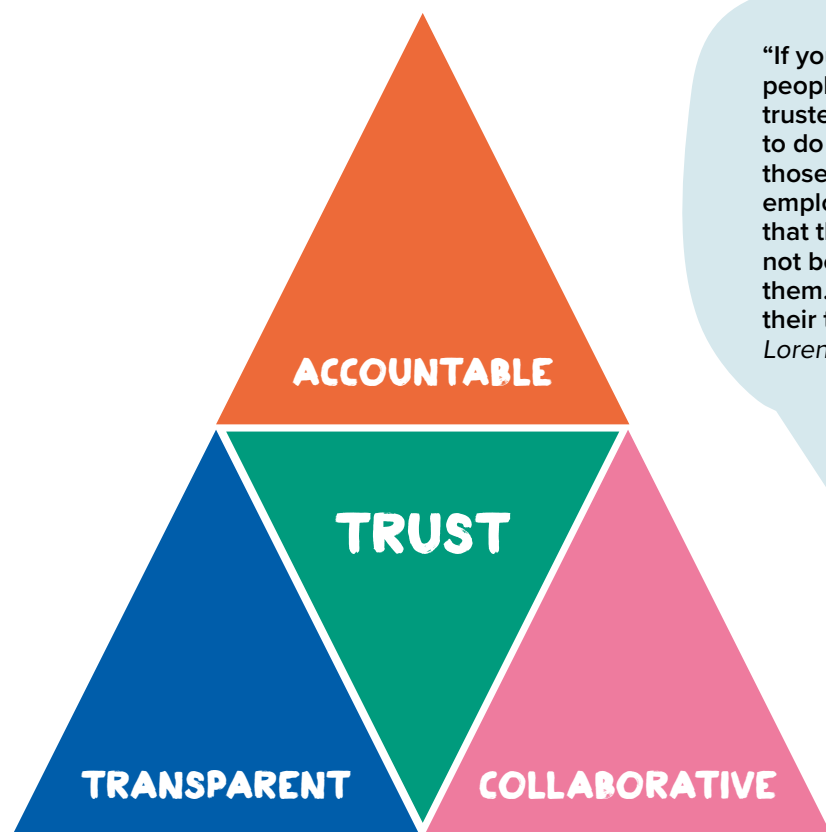
**1 Good political engagement is transparent:** it opens up the political process so that people can be heard and involved, are given clear and accessible information, and it brings communities and decision-makers into the same room.

**2 It is also accountable:** decision-makers visit communities on their own terms, suspend their preconceptions, listen sensitively and actively, then act, return and report back what they have done, agreeing together next steps.

**3 Finally, it is collaborative:** it establishes a partnership of equals between communities, representatives and statutory bodies, focused on mutual listening and building common ground to get work done together.

**At the heart of the Trust Triangle is a simple message: do with communities, not to.**

Hear it in the words of one of our community research collaborators, Lorena Hodgson of [Wisbech Projects CIC](#), which does vital arts community engagement work in a deprived English market town:



"If you want to help the people, ask the people, then do what they ask. If you are trusted to handle the money, and trusted to do the right thing, you have to trust those you are paid to help. You are their employee, you are paid to help them. Trust that they know what they want. That may not be what you think, but you are not them. Help them do what they want, gain their trust in return. Stop, look and listen."  
*Lorena Hodgson*

# THE PROBLEM OF DISENGAGEMENT

## WHO IS DISENGAGED?

Evidence shows that various groups experience barriers to fully engaging in political processes, like registering to vote/voting, taking part in certain political activities, or getting involved in their communities. These groups include:

- Young people
- Unpaid carers
- Minority ethnic groups
- Unskilled workers
- Long-term unemployed individuals
- People with disabilities that limit their daily activities.

## WHY ARE THEY DISENGAGED?

Well, some people overlap in these otherwise quite varied groups, but they all share one thing in common: they lack **power**, and they lack **proximity**.

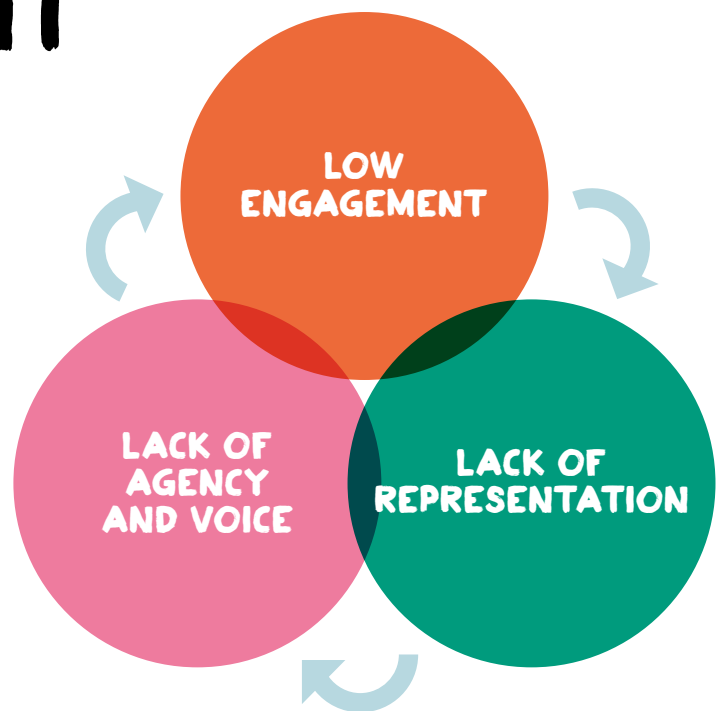
Historically discriminated peoples tend to be underrepresented in mainstream politics, media and public life. Young people are largely unrepresented in mainstream politics, and the problem of historic low youth voter turnout means that political parties often fail to make any positive policy offer to young people. [YouGov \(2019\)](#) found that nearly 40% of 18-24 year olds think their vote is not important to the general election result. That may be a fair assessment of how they are prioritised.

People in long-term unemployment or low-paid work lack the money and time needed to follow political events or take part in political activities. They may have little reason to trust that mainstream politicians will act in their interests, and not in the interests of corporate donors and lobbyists. The problem of time also limits the engagement of unpaid carers and disabled people, who often find themselves struggling on a daily basis to meet their living needs, with mainstream politicians again rarely coming from such backgrounds.

Underpinning this sense of distrust and disconnection with politics is proximity: the action is perceived to be happening far away, either led by a “Westminster elite” (or Cardiff or Edinburgh elite etc), or, at a local level, in wealthier county capitals away from more deprived market towns and rural areas.

“there’s no reason [to vote] because they’re all as bad as each other. They all lie. I know they say if you want a voice, if you don’t vote you can’t say nothing. Well, I’m sorry, but I’m not going to vote for lies.”

“Andy”, 40s, interviewee in Boston.



## AS A RESULT, A NEGATIVE CYCLE OF EXCLUSION PLAYS OUT:

The result is that such groups become further cut out of democratic politics, compounding disengagement and resulting in often bad or insensitive policy-making that fails its core constituents.

Of course, there are bigger factors at play here: the UK’s first-past-the-post system often results in political safe seats where votes do not carry the same weight. And in the background of all of this is social inequality - where some voices carry more weight over others.

This toolkit cannot solve all these interrelated issues. But if you are an elected representative, an organisation or a researcher who is committed to your own engagement with marginalised communities, then read on for some practical approaches to take this forward at a local level.

## THERE ARE TWO TAKEAWAYS:

**1** **Build trust into all forms of political engagement.**  
This we have covered already.

**2** **Show sensitivity to place:** begin your own work of engagement by spending time in the places where your community is, listening and understanding. Compared to the gloomy stats at the beginning, **61% of adults (2023/24) felt they strongly belonged to their immediate neighbourhood.** Research shows that place-sensitive work is far more effective at engaging marginalised communities. Given the long-term agenda in the UK towards devolution, incorporate place-sensitivity and proximity into your approach.



# EXAMPLES

## FROM DIFFERENT OU PROJECTS



### CHANGEMAKERS

This project addressed young adults' understanding of political and social change in the UK, focusing on post-secondary education interventions, using Wales as a case study. Working with Welsh citizens aged 16-24, the project created the [Changemakers website](#). This platform educates young people in Wales on making political and social change, understanding devolution, which institutions are responsible for the issues they care about, and how

those institutions can be engaged with. It also led to recommendations for policymakers and educators about cost-effective ways to increase understanding of and participation in politics of young adults.

#### WHAT WE DID:

- 1 **Desk research:** examined wider policy and research to set the scene
- 2 **Initial face-to-face meeting:** met with various local community organisations to establish connections, understand key issues, and gauge interest in participating in the research
- 3 **Online surveys:** conducted surveys with students and young people more widely via internal University survey, social media, and an external marketing company, allowing for a wide reach and substantial feedback
- 4 **Resource evaluation:** assessed young people's engagement with a previously created resource, providing feedback on its use as an educational tool and offering baseline information for the broader research
- 5 **Online focus groups:** facilitated by two local youth community organisations/charities.

#### WHY WE DID IT THIS WAY:

- **Participant preferences:** although we offered in-person focus groups, participants preferred online engagement for greater accessibility
- **Participant benefits:** participants received Open University certificates of completion, which they could add to their CVs, as well as vouchers for their time
- **Triangulation:** combining desk research, surveys, and focus groups allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the issue, beyond the limitations of a small (~20) number of focus group participants.

### PLACE, COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION IN THE FENS

This project examined what local residents need to feel like they live in a good place, focusing on the Fens region of East England, a mostly rural area of high political disengagement, multiple deprivation and marginalisation. Working with residents of Wisbech, Boston and Peterborough, including farmers in neighbouring areas, the project explored how **infrastructure, connection and identity** are interdependent needs for people to feel they live in a good place. It demonstrated that the expertise, passion, ideas and relationships required to make positive change already exist in Fens communities, but what they need is money, spaces, decision-making power and trust. The project led to recommendations for policymakers about transforming English regions through targeted investment in communities and empowering local infrastructure.

#### WHAT WE DID:

- 1 **Desk research:** digital and local historical archives, academic, UK and local government policy paper analysis
- 2 **Relationship building:** spent six months regularly meeting with local residents, community organisations, civil society workers and local politicians to build trust and co-develop the initial research approach
- 3 **In-depth interviews:** conducted over one hundred interviews with residents over one year, totalling over one million transcribed words
- 4 **Focus groups and workshops:** organised fifteen resident discussion groups with a wide demographic representation
- 5 **Creative engagement:** collected personal reflections in the form of poems, photography and guided walks, and held a public event about place and storytelling in Peterborough. An accessible short report, a longer report and a film will be launched in May.

#### WHY WE DID IT THIS WAY:

- **Trust building:** getting to know residents and understanding their needs, emotions, priorities and ideas before conducting interviews
- **Local partnerships:** paid local community organisations as research consultants on the project to empower local people and amplify existing expertise
- **Participant benefits:** all interviewees were paid for their time, with gift cards to the value of £20 for a 1-hour interview and travel expenses covered
- **Ethical engagement:** the approach prioritised input having consequences, rather than empty consultation, with the research practically setting out what is now needed to deliver positive change through empowering communities to drive changes themselves.



Beyond Borders: Sharing Stories of Peterborough workshop (Hana Sayeed)



Barking and Dagenham focus group

## GROWTH FOR ALL AND THE RIGHT TO COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

This dual project explores growth, development and community needs in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, an area facing high levels of unemployment and deprivation while undergoing transformative change. The initial "Growth for All along the A13?" project examined residents' experiences of urban development in this "growth opportunity" area. Building on this foundation, "The Right to Community Infrastructure" addresses the decline in community spaces and services that have dwindled under financial constraints since 2010. Working with Thames Life, a community development charity, the project aims to develop an innovative metric to assess community resources, ensuring they meet the needs of current and future residents.

### WHAT WE DID:

- 1 **In-depth resident interviews:** gathered perspectives from approximately 30 residents across the borough on development impacts, community needs, and future aspirations
- 2 **Focus groups:** brought residents together for discussions in informal community spaces to explore the meaning of "growth" in the context of place, lived experiences and

regional inequalities

- 3 **Reflective tasks:** invited residents to document and reflect on their community experiences and infrastructure needs
- 4 **Community researcher skills development:** now training 15 local residents as community researchers, providing them skills to collect data on local amenities' availability and accessibility
- 5 **Mixed data collection:** conducted interviews, focus groups, and surveys with both residents and local businesses to build a comprehensive picture of community infrastructure needs and usage.

### WHY WE DID IT THIS WAY:

- **Local expertise:** recognised that local residents are the experts in their community's strengths, challenges, and needs that outside researchers cannot fully understand. As the experts, paying them accordingly (up to £50 in gift cards as research participants, or £13.85 per hour (London Living Wage) as community researchers)
- **Capacity building:** invested in local residents as researchers to develop skills within the community while ensuring culturally sensitive data collection
- **Sustainable outcomes:** explored funding solutions including Section 106, Community Infrastructure Levy, and local wealth-sharing initiatives to ensure long-term viability
- **Transformative aims:** sought not just to document issues but to create tools for advocacy, including a template for replicating the community research model and policy recommendations





# PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Here are some overarching strategies and principles for effectively engaging and understanding disengaged groups:

## SET CLEAR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

- Define your purpose: be explicit about your aims for both you and the group
- Use appropriate language: tailor your terminology and level of communication to your audience
- Understand the context: consider the location, background, and specific circumstances of the local place, group and community
- Be clear about the expectations and costs associated with participation, including time commitments. Wherever possible, pay for people's time and expenses.

## BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST

- Be beneficiary-led: focus on the needs and perspectives of those you aim to help
- Engage local partners: involve local groups from the beginning and throughout the process. Ask them who is missing and who you need to also engage.
- Listen actively: prioritise hearing directly from people rather than about them
- Maintain open communication: build a transparent and ongoing two-way dialogue (for example, outcomes/ findings should be communicated back to the groups that participated and ideally sense checked by them)
- Adapt communication methods: use the most effective means of communication for different groups
- Acknowledge and credit the role played by participants and community partners.

## SELECT THE RIGHT ENGAGEMENT METHODS

- Go to them: make efforts to reach out rather than expecting them to come to you
- Diversify engagement strategies: explore various ways to engage to boost participation
- Choose context-appropriate methods: select engagement techniques that fit the specific situation
- Address barriers: identify and mitigate obstacles to engagement, such as travel costs or digital access.

## ADHERE TO ETHICAL STANDARDS

- Follow ethical guidelines: ensure all actions comply with established ethical standards
- Respect cultural considerations: be mindful of cultural norms and practices
- Obtain informed consent: secure clear and informed consent from participants, including by providing information about how participants can withdraw their consent, if needed
- Protect data: ensure proper data protection and storage practices.

## EVALUATE AND IMPROVE CONTINUOUSLY

- Seek ongoing feedback: gather input on your approach and activities throughout the process, not just at the end
- Provide updates: keep participants informed about progress and developments
- Act on what you hear and report back – make yourself accountable.
- Maintain post-research communication: continue engaging with participants after the research concludes
- Consider participant benefits: offer tangible benefits like certificates, badges, or access to resources.

## THREE PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL COMMUNITY RESEARCH

**1 DO WITH, NOT TO:** listen and develop research with communities, respect their experiences, emotions, knowledge and priorities. They are the experts; you are there to learn.

**2 PAY PEOPLE FOR THEIR TIME:** interviews, workshops, even conversations take up valuable time. Pay for that time or offer some token of appreciation or other useful contribution.

**3 RESEARCH SHOULD BENEFIT THE COMMUNITY:** research is usually, indirectly, funded by the public. Good research amplifies strengths that already exist within communities while setting out a practical path for positive change.

# WHERE AND WHEN TO ENGAGE

Political engagement comes in all shapes and sizes. Some formats will work better for some communities over others, but underpinning success in all approaches is building trust and proximity. Here are some flashcards to get you thinking about how you might engage communities you wish to work with:

## OPEN MEETINGS AND EVENTS

**Purpose:** a space for people to share opinions and agree ways forward

**Audience:** anyone who can physically attend and is comfortable attending

**Best for:** people with more free time (e.g. the retired) or in existing positions of local responsibility

**Pitfalls:** requires careful chairing to avoid becoming unproductive (e.g. dominated by a small number of voices, or too stage-managed so that communities have no input)

**Mitigations:** set clear aims, expectations and ground rules; invite key underrepresented community members to speak briefly; carefully chair the meeting to ensure it is both representative of different views and action-focused.

**Example:** Giving Care in Gateshead – public meeting to mark research launch ([view the event, film and report](#))

## FOCUS GROUPS

**Purpose:** in-depth discussion with specific people to get detailed insights on an issue

**Audience:** an invited or self-selecting group of research participants

**Best for:** communities you have already built trust and dialogue with

**Pitfalls:** without trust or including a diverse range of perspectives, it will not yield new or important findings

**Mitigations:** set clear aims, expectations and ground rules; aim to have 1-1 interactions with all invitees beforehand to understand their backgrounds and contributions; avoid wasting time on icebreakers or topics of common knowledge and focus on drawing out practical examples from lived experience and input on practical ways forward.

**Example:** Place, Community and Connection focus groups and Changemakers online focus groups.

## ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

**Purpose:** reach a wide range of audiences either through a webpage, online event or social media

**Best for:** reaching those who otherwise face barriers such as time, confidence, money to travel to unpaid research engagements. Enables the use of polls, live streams, message threads and social media discussions.

**Pitfalls:** requires digital access and skills which can be expensive or hard to use; impersonal, leading to knee-jerk responses or the lack of communicating through body language; difficult to maintain sustained engagement.

**Mitigations:** be clear about aims, expectations and the limitations of online vs in-person; if possible aim to reach your community through both.

## SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

**Purpose:** gather extensive quantitative data to identify trends, patterns, and anonymous feedback

**Audience:** anyone who is willing to respond, either in-person or online

**Best for:** people who are time-poor and otherwise underrepresented

**Pitfalls:** sample bias (who it reaches); participants not fully understanding the questions or purpose behind them; fake responses from non-genuine participants (common on social media-promoted surveys)

**Mitigations:** use trusted neighbourhood or community networks (e.g. WhatsApp groups) to target surveys; include a question that requires some local knowledge; clearly explain the purpose up front and link to your project; utilise professional marketing/survey companies who can ensure the survey is as representative as possible.

**Example:** Changemakers (open social media survey, and representative survey conducted by an external marketing company).

## ARTISTIC ENGAGEMENT

**Purpose:** use creative artforms to connect with communities in innovative ways and encourage them to express their identities, stories and experiences on their own terms

**Audience:** anyone who feels comfortable using creative forms (not everyone)

**Best for:** wide-ranging, but particularly with younger people, or for people who might find it difficult to express themselves on a challenging or traumatic issue (e.g. unpaid carers, disabled people where the format is appropriate). Also usual for social activists/NGO workers.

**Pitfalls:** can lead to overly personal work without clear practical application; can sometimes dig up painful feelings that participants are not expecting

**Mitigations:** be open and flexible in the approach, let participants lead with the media they feel comfortable with, set aims and expectations early on

**Example:** [Art for a Better World](#)

'Art for a better world' exhibited artworks made in collaboration between academics and cartoonists aimed at making the latest research about pressing social challenges accessible to general audiences. It also incorporated artwork produced in a workshop with local Year 10 students, who produced art on the social issues that matter to them.



## ADDITIONAL METHODS

**Community walks and tours:** organise local tours to explore community issues and solutions firsthand

**Pop-up events:** host temporary events or stalls in public and community spaces to attract spontaneous participation

**Citizens assemblies:** a group of people selected from the general population to deliberate issues and give recommendations.





“there needs to be something community based, where [local residents] say “these are the things that we need doing”. It's like, if we're going to vote for people to be in power, these are the list of things that we then want you to do in this area.”  
*“Alex”, 20s, interviewee in rural Cambs.*

# ONLINE OR FACE-TO-FACE?

## EACH HAVE ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES

### ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

#### PROS:

- Accessibility: theoretically allows participation from anywhere, removing geographical barriers
- Convenience: participants can engage from home/ their choice of location, and potentially at their own pace and schedule (engagement method dependent)
- Cost-effective: reduces costs related to travel and venues etc
- Wider reach: can attract a larger and more diverse audience through social media and online platforms.

#### CONS:

- Technical issues and understanding: requires reliable internet access and familiarity with digital tools
- Impersonal: may lack the personal touch and immediacy of face-to-face interactions
- Engagement quality: can be challenging to maintain attention and foster deep discussions online.

### FACE-TO-FACE ENGAGEMENT

#### PROS:

- Personal connection: allows for direct interaction
- Engagement depth: may be easier to facilitate more in-depth and nuanced discussions
- Non-verbal cues: enables the use of body language and facial expressions to enhance communication.

#### CONS:

- Logistical challenges: requires planning for venues, travel, and scheduling
- Limited reach: may be restricted to local participants, reducing diversity. Potential accessibility difficulties in terms of time and access to childcare etc.
- Higher costs: involves expenses related to physical meetings and materials.

Both methods can be effective depending on the context and goals of the engagement. Combining both approaches can often yield the best results, leveraging the strengths of each to maximise participation and impact.



# SO, WHAT CAN YOU TAKE FORWARD?

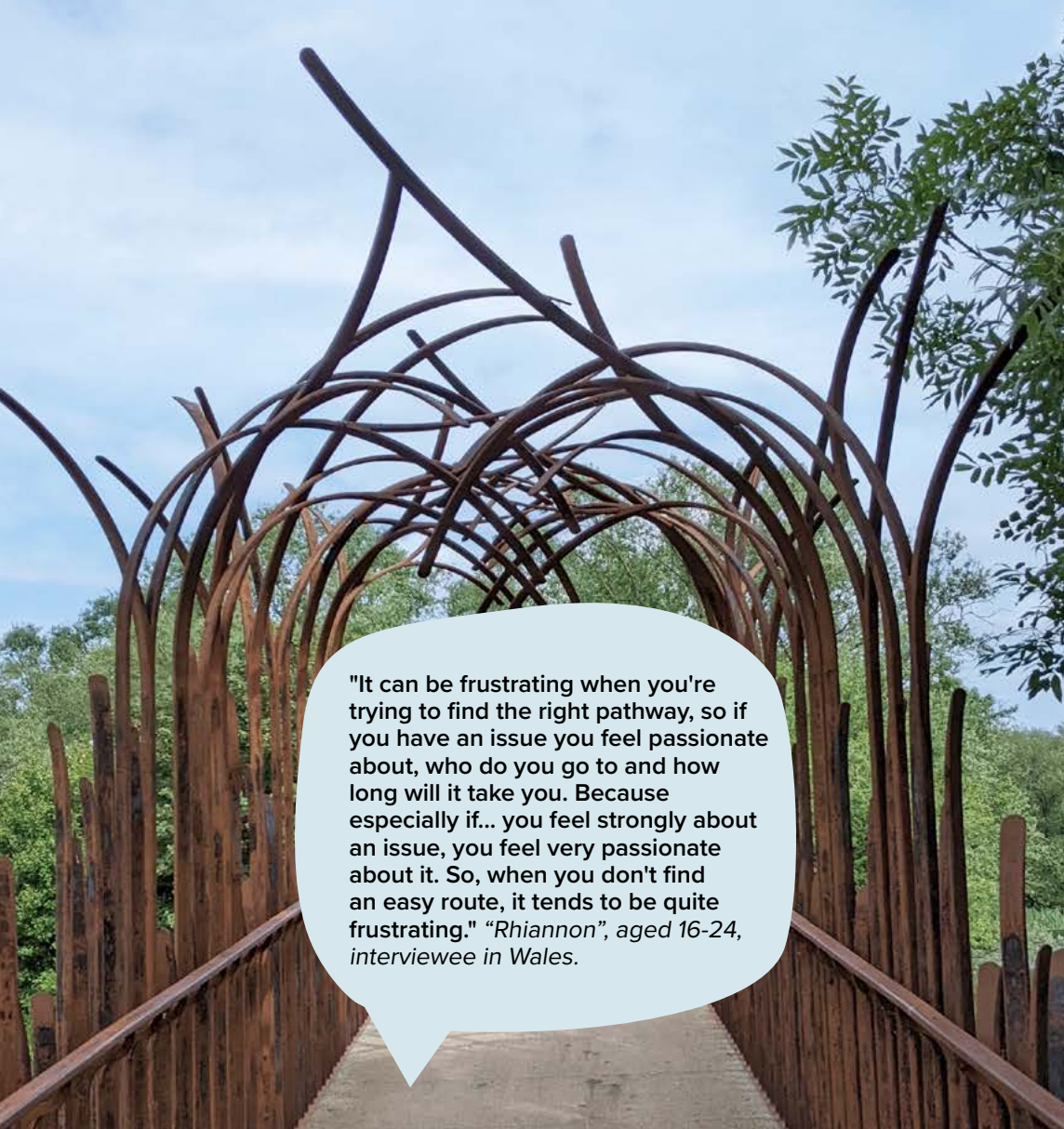
These are just a small selection of ideas and approaches from the excellent research taking place at the OU on political engagement. You can find many more by going to the [Open Societal Challenges](#) and [School of Social Sciences and Global Studies](#) research pages. These projects certainly do not claim to have all the answers. Often the best place to begin is by working out the question you need to ask.

## HERE ARE TWO TO GET YOU STARTED IN YOUR OWN WORK:

- **The empty chair:** in your next in-person community meeting, leave aside one empty chair at the table. This represents the missing person or community. Who is not here at this meeting, who needs to be included or should be included that you are not currently reaching? How will you reach them next time? What might they say if they were here?
- **Stop, look and listen:** when was the last time you stopped, looked and just listened to the core community you are trying to work with? How do they experience, make sense of, frame and narrate the issues that they are facing? What are the strengths in this community that you can build on? What are the preconceptions about them you must leave behind?

## Ultimately, to engage the disengaged, you must go and engage.

Build trust, focus on proximity, think about power, and see it as a continual process of communication between partners of equals. Sometimes communication is hard, sometimes it is held back by misunderstandings or past harms; however, the onus is on all of us to serve our communities and work together in the interests of democracy.



"It can be frustrating when you're trying to find the right pathway, so if you have an issue you feel passionate about, who do you go to and how long will it take you. Because especially if... you feel strongly about an issue, you feel very passionate about it. So, when you don't find an easy route, it tends to be quite frustrating." *"Rhiannon", aged 16-24, interviewee in Wales.*



## CHECKLIST

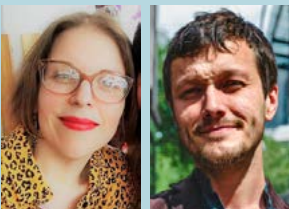
This checklist might be a helpful starting point when beginning the process of engaging with disengaged groups.

### TO DO

- 1** Have I set clear goals and objectives?
- 2** Have I identified my target group?
- 3** Do I understand the context (the issue, group, participants)? Have I stopped, looked and listened?
- 4** Have I identified relevant partners/networks?
- 5** Have I identified the best ways to build relationships with them? (Including benefits for them and compensation/payment for time)
- 6** Have I chosen the appropriate engagement method(s) and addressed barriers to engagement?
- 7** Have I identified and addressed ethical issues?
- 8** Do I have an appropriate communication method and plan in place?
- 9** Have I considered post-research/engagement communication?
- 10** Have I built in a commitment to report back and act upon what this engagement might tell me?

**IF YOU WANT  
TO HELP THE  
PEOPLE, ASK  
THE PEOPLE,  
THEN DO WHAT  
THEY ASK**

**YOU HAVE TO TRUST  
THOSE YOU ARE PAID  
TO HELP. YOU ARE THEIR  
EMPLOYEE, YOU ARE PAID  
TO HELP THEM**



Dr Donna Smith and Dr Dan Taylor, both Senior Lecturers in Politics in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The Open University. Donna leads the Changemakers project, which explores improving young adults' understanding of making political and social change. Dan researchers across England on community, connection and care and is currently working on three projects, Inclusive growth and housing in Barking and Dagenham, Unpaid care and social care in Gateshead, and Community, connection and place in the Fens.  
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