Connect
the Dots

Connect the Dots
Our response to COVID-19
As of 15 June 2020

Connect with us at
hello@connectthedots.ie

Connect the Dots
Our Perspective

Connect the Dots are experts in the design and delivery of stakeholder engagement & public consultation strategies for sustainable impact. We work on both sides of the Atlantic with local and national governments and institutions and with leading infrastructure, architecture, planning and public space organisations.

Our perspective: The level of trust in a society, both interpersonal and in institutions is a key influencing factor for how well that society functions. The wellbeing of citizens, good governance and economic growth are driven by high levels of trust. During the current COVID-19 crisis both in Ireland and on a global level, trust matters even more than ever. We need trust in our communities to support us when we are at our most vulnerable physically and psychologically. We need to trust in our government and political institutions to ensure that essential guidelines are followed and emergency measures from healthcare to direct social protection are put in place to protect us. We need trust in mainstream media for primary and secondary sources of information we can reply upon. We need trust in civil society organisations for expert support, focused advocacy and creative problem solving to move us forward.
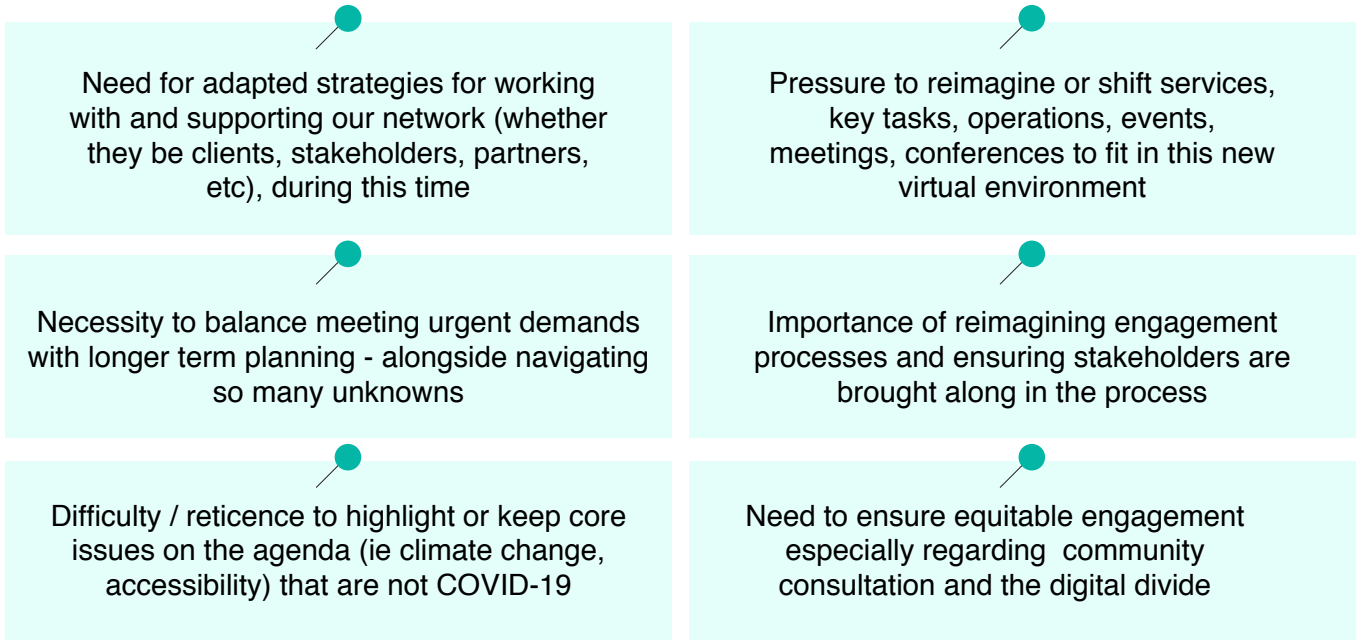
We believe that the careful engagement of all key stakeholders, in a collaborative, thoughtful way is critical when forming solutions to the challenges we are facing. Now more than ever, we value listening as a driver of trust. We want to continue to build solutions that embed a sense of belonging and commitment in communities, where people know that their voices matter. We want to be part of solutions that resolve problems, not that create them. We want to collaborate on projects where this trust is valued and cultivated. To do this, we will be leveraging our expertise and insights from local, regional and national projects in Ireland and the US (East Coast), with public, private and civil society organisations including Dublin City Council, the National Transport Authority, Meath County Council, the Oireachtas, Comcast NBC Universal, Center City District Philadelphia, DBFL Engineering, Hibernia REIT, Knight Foundation, South Street Headhouse District, and more.

We strongly believe that during this uncertain and unprecedented time, forging connection has become even more important. It is possible to continue to engage and we must do so in a collaborative and inclusive manner, exploring, learning and iterating as we go. This is how the most robust and resilient solutions are found - together. Up until mid March 2020, the majority of the projects we engaged with involved a number of face to face elements designed to form key insights to enable more informed decision making and problem solving. We have since been piloting innovations in the remote delivery of such stakeholder engagement processes, which we believe will ensure that we can continue to enable high quality engagement in line with our core values.

We will be detailing progress of these pilots and our collective learnings here and on our website in the coming weeks. We hope they will prove useful to you during these times.
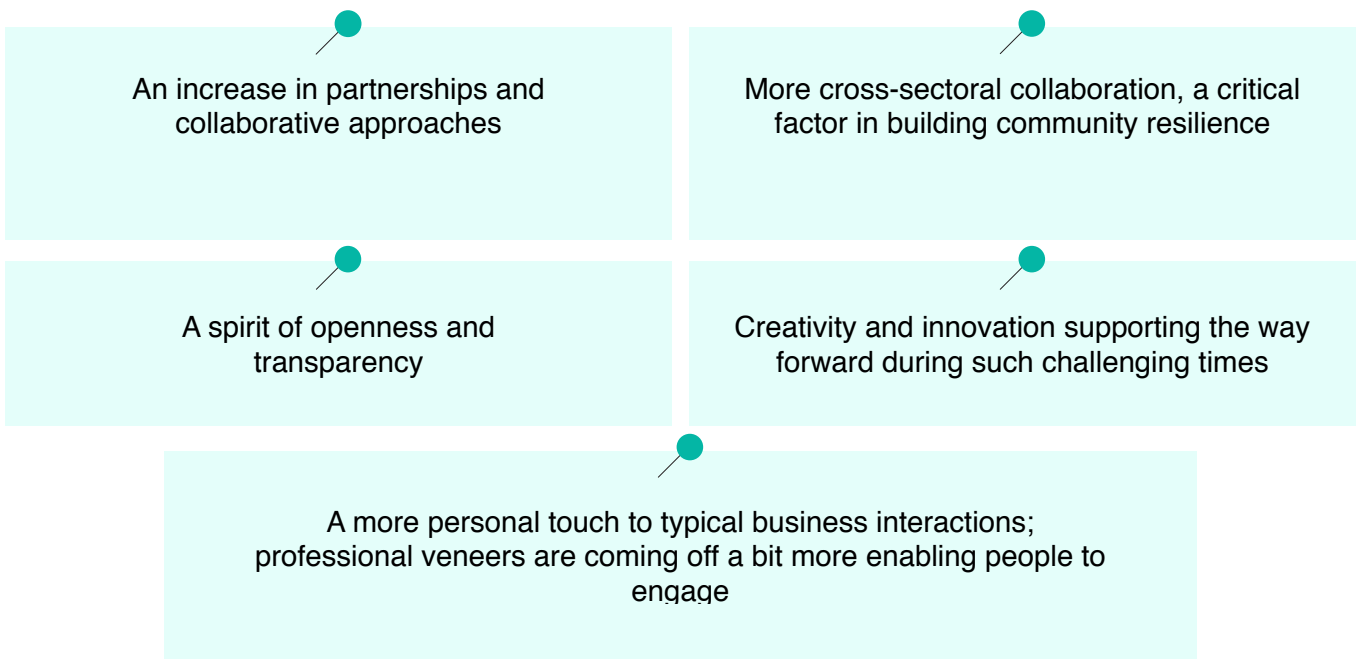

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Our Shared Challenges

From our calls with members of our network to the virtual support and problem solving workshops we've been hosting, we've seen:

Need for adapted strategies for working with and supporting our network (whether they be clients, stakeholders, partners, etc), during this time

Pressure to reimagine or shift services, key tasks, operations, events, meetings, conferences to fit in this new virtual environment

Necessity to balance meeting urgent demands with longer term planning - alongside navigating so many unknowns

Importance of reimagining engagement processes and ensuring stakeholders are brought along in the process

Difficulty / reticence to highlight or keep core issues on the agenda (ie climate change, accessibility) that are not COVID-19

Need to ensure equitable engagement especially regarding community consultation and the digital divide

Some Silver Linings

From our calls with members of our network to the virtual support and problem solving workshops we've been hosting, we've seen:

An increase in partnerships and collaborative approaches

More cross-sectoral collaboration, a critical factor in building community resilience

A spirit of openness and transparency

Creativity and innovation supporting the way forward during such challenging times

A more personal touch to typical business interactions; professional veneers are coming off a bit more enabling people to engage

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Productive & Meaningful Engagement
a value-based framework

Our insights on a framework for approaching engagement during the time to ensure value and impact.

1.   Empathy: Being open to the evolving and varied needs of your stakeholders in order to adapt responses and solutions in a humane way

- Step back and evaluate, ask individual questions to learn about needs / situations / challenges / comfort with tech
- Openness to re-adapting topics / modes of engagement accordingly
- Understanding that not everyone will have the capacity to engage in the same way as before / as one another. This could change daily or weekly, so offer varied types and levels of engagement to allow a range of input
- Consistently check in to ensure relevance, meaningfulness, and impact

2.   Transparency: Open, accessible, clear, two-way communications - building trust is at the core of keeping stakeholders connected and engaged

- By providing open updates on your work, stakeholders will feel respected and in the loop
- Demonstrating two-way communication is essential, since most communication right now is top down
- Allow for, and solicit feedback (both anonymous and direct) to reflect upon and improve your own engagement methods

3.   Collaboration leads to innovation; innovation to resilience

- Stakeholders deserve a chance / opportunity to build into the process, which most often results in a better project
- Including stakeholders in the idea development process leads to buy-in and deeper participation going forward
- Collaboration leads to innovation and more resilient solutions
- When virtual work feels limited, build in more opportunities for collaboration
- Connect people across networks and break down silos by facilitating diverse groups, identifying common goals, and bringing people together in a comfortable, shared space.

4.   Creativity: No two processes are alike because no two communities are alike. Complex problem solving requires creative solutions.

- Combine tools to maximise productivity and participation. It is important to create spaces and avenues that enable all types of individuals to be heard, be engaged, and feel at ease participating. That's why at Connect the Dots, we recommend utilising a variety of tools. Within a single activity, such as a virtual workshop, you can call upon tools that serve to engage all learning and participation styles. Address auditory participation with presentations and video via Zoom; visual with images, diagrams, and graphic collaboration with tools like Mural; reading/writing with Google Docs; kinaesthetic with polls and voting via Sketchboard
- Recreate moments of personalised social interactions: recreate watercooler moments online by allowing more time for connection in the beginning of meetings
- Mix virtual and non-virtual tools: follow up a presentation with a phone call, or send a thank-you note by mail
- No matter what types of tools you choose to mix together, the whole process needs to be facilitated thoughtfully. Practice the integration of tools and employ good hosting behaviours.

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[Digital] Tools we Recommend for Engagement during COVID-19


Zoom

for group video and break-out sessions

First on our list is Zoom. We were open to using other primary tools for our calls large and small but we keep going back to Zoom. After over 2 weeks at home, a large number of people are becoming Zoom-literate who were not before. The stand-out tool for us is virtual breakout rooms, which helps recreate a small workshop or meeting environment with large or smaller groups. Like in an in-person workshop, we found it works best when you structure who is in each the break-out group ahead of time. You can run Zoom in conjunction with other tools below such as Mural which we are doing now. In addition, through Zoom you can share your screen and show presentations and videos. You can also change your background if you want more privacy (see canva.com to get Zoom Virtual Background templates). We just piloted the voting function and found it useful. **Teams** is another tool that enables group video chats but not break out rooms. However, we found it more personable in that it allows a presentation and its presenter to be seen at the same time.
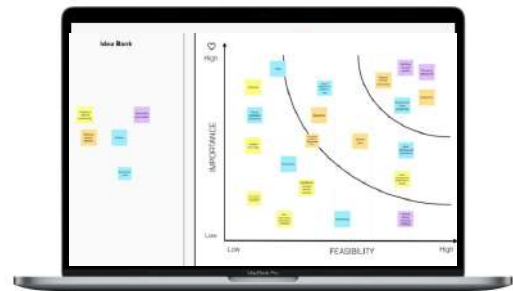
Mural

for collaborative worksheets

This is one of our favourites so far. It creates an online virtual collaboration space - essentially a recreation of a table at a workshop with worksheets to go through. It's easy to use, comes with lots of worksheet templates (plus we've been working on translating our own templates to this). It also allows you to post stickies, share ideas, brainstorm, and more. We found it visual, interactive, and colourful. A nice quality as well is that anyone with link can collaborate (no registration barrier). We have found that it's essential to give everyone a quick demo for Mural before the session proper starts. If everyone can write their name on a post it, they are good to go. Offer opportunities to engage via WhatsApp or text to send comments which a facilitator adds to the Mural during a session. It not, you may risk losing people early on if they suffer a tech-block.
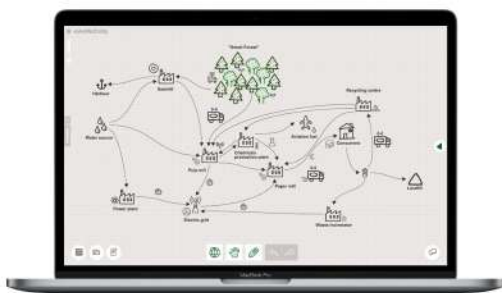

Sketchboard

for sharing and collaborative commenting on plans, designs, images and more; also for brainstorming

This platform gives you a great range of flexibility - and is particularly useful in terms of enabling groups to comment together on plans, maps, images etc that you can put directly on the 'sketch board.' Free form drawing is allowed to - with support from options of icons, arrows, etc from the platform.

An even simpler version of this could be a Google doc or Google slides too; both allow for live collaboration.
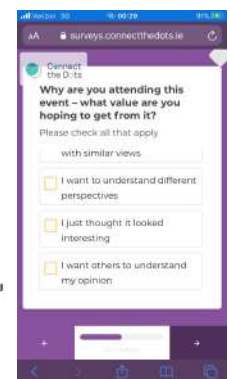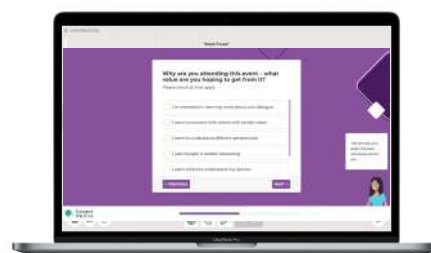

Engage

for accessible and community-driven surveys

Engage is our survey platform, and is designed to be more accessible, playful, and engaging and user-friendly than other such platforms. For example, support and encouragement for participants are provided throughout to encourage participants to feel comfortable and confident when filling out the survey. Additionally, throughout the survey, there are elements including visualisations of other respondents' answers, that reimagine the traditional survey into a communal experience (rather than a vacuum).
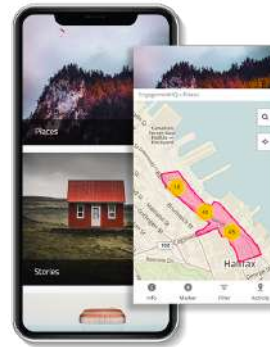
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[Digital] Tools we Recommend for Engagement during COVID-19
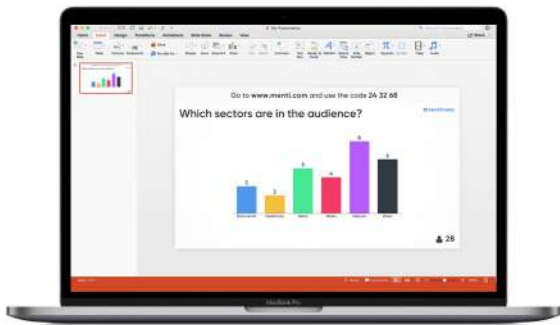
Mentimeter

for polling and immediate surveys to enable interactive meetings via phone and online
Powerful immediate feedback / survey tool through phone, for more interactive meetings. It also visualises answers for people to discuss live (via Zoom, etc) or to be included in reports.

Engage HQ or Social Pinpoint

for a variety of community engagement tools in one platform
These are wide-ranging community engagement platforms which allows for collaborative mapping, ideas wall, open forums, surveys, and more. This can work for a variety of projects including but not limited to transport, planning, parks, environmental. However, this platform needs a deeper level of understanding of the tool and thus requires strong familiarity before customising it to the project.

Miro

for online collaborative white boards and idea walls
The online collaborative white-boarding platform to bring teams together, anytime, anywhere. Beautiful, but need to register for access. Good for smaller workshops. Flinga also works well for this - particular as post-it boards that can also be pre-designed. Forumbee is also an option but more expensive. We found Fling and Forumbee have similar capabilities to Miro, but people need to register their emails. All can also stay up between engagements to keep the discussion going.
Zoom can also do whiteboards but we recommend these specialised platforms.

Facebook Live (with Crowdcast)

for accessible and interactive communications
While these new platforms offer strong benefits, there is something to be said for leveraging what already exists too. Many people already have and are comfortable with Facebook so we also recommend 'meeting people where they are' and engaging via Facebook groups and Pages and video chats. Facebook Live is particularly useful as it allows you to live-broadcast presentations, panels, meetings, and the like. This is already being used as a tool to reimagine religious services. However, to make it more interactive, we have found out that you can use it in conjunction with the Crowdcast platform to enable Q & A, chats, and polls and even invite attendees on screen.

[Digital] Tools we Recommend for Engagement during COVID-19

KUMU:

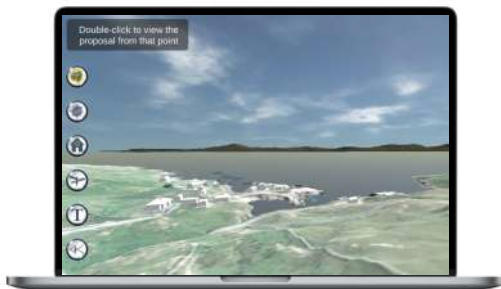People & relationship mapping for group video and break-out sessions

https://www.kumu.io/

Videos - Gehl

Ways to keep people updated on projects

https://gehlpeople.com/

Spacial renderings

3D visualisations & tours

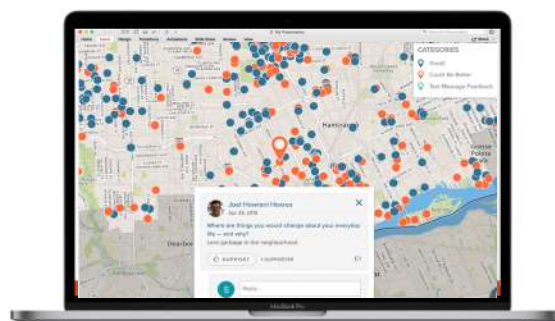http://inishturk200326.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/

Virtual Rooms

Virtual spaces to house all project information and updates, much like an online portal or website. Critical to pair with direct engagement streams.

https://consultation.ai/demo/

CoUrbanize

This is a really helpful tool as it allows you to give virtual tours of physical places - and you can collect feedback from participants along the way. Community members are, after all, the experts of their own neighbourhoods - so tours like this (even if virtual) are still incredibly useful in gathering helpful insights and developing shared understanding of place. Other platforms that others in this space are looking at as well are Storymap, Google Tour Creator, Historypin, among others.

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How to Apply these Tools
makes all the difference

Based on our piloting of all the tools above, there are some key practical insights that apply in almost all cases to particularly ensure that your stakeholder sessions / meetings / workshops run smoothly.

Here are our top 10 tips so far:

1.   Mix and match tools together to maximise productivity and participation. It is important to create spaces and avenues that enable all types of individuals to be heard, be engaged, and feel at ease participating. That's why at Connect the Dots, we recommend utilising a variety of tools . For example, even within one method like a virtual workshop, you can integrate elements to engage all learnings and participation styles *(auditory* with presentations and video via Zoom; *visual* with images, diagrams, graphic collaboration tools like Mural); r*eading/writing* with Google Docs, pre-session materials; *kinaesthetic* with polls, voting, Sketchboard).

2.   The lead up to the workshop sets you up for success. The change over to virtual workshops is quite new to people so it's important to help each attendee feel prepared and comfortable to engage. From a tech standpoint, this includes ensuring people have the opportunity to get used to the tech beforehand. What we found useful, in addition to providing demo videos, was offering brief 1-1 coaching beforehand and even virtual facilitation training too to give the opportunity for participants to help facilitate, thereby building their confidence and capacity. From a communications standpoint, it is important that your pre-workshop communications are very clear and the instructions are easy to follow. We found that short emails work best with the relevant links (such as to Zoom) in an obvious spot. You can share the collaborative worksheet links once you're in the call itself. At Connect the Dots we strongly believe in gathering insights beforehand so you can better match needs and expectations. So we always send out a pre-workshop survey and also try to do a focus group beforehand. This not only helps give participants a voice in shaping the session but you get to better understand their needs, interests, experience level with tech and their likelihood to attend.

3.   Tech support is critical. A successful session means understanding how all the basic functions of each tool work and running at least one practice session with a few participants beforehand. Participants in any session will expect a basic understanding and troubleshooting capacity to keep the session moving along. You cannot facilitate a large session and problem-solve tech issues at the same time. Someone who can support individuals to get back onto the call if they drop off, communicate if their microphone goes or just get them up to the speed of the rest of the group quickly is essential. Find an additional way to communicate with each other ie WhatsApp on the side.

4.   Provide other ways for communication during a virtual workshop beyond video. Set-up some easy alternatives in case there are unfixable communication problems with one or more participants, or if participants would prefer to contribute in a more anonymous way. If you have mobile numbers of the group at hand, tech support can WhatsApp or text a participant in a session who can't or is having trouble actively take part - and bring their comments into the discussion. Or alternatively, you can add them to the session notes afterwards. Quick voice comments via WhatsApp can also be included in the discussion live or added afterwards.

5.   Ensure you have strong facilitation. Just because it is a virtual workshop, it doesn't mean that facilitation isn't as important. In fact, we have been finding it even more critical. We recommend having one facilitator per breakout room - and pairing that ideally with one notetaker too who is supporting the collaborative worksheet (ie on Mural). Like in a large-scale workshop, the main host of the whole session can also move from breakout room to breakout room to check in. Key facilitation techniques for virtual workshops include: Limit non-stop speaking to 10 min or less; Clarify roles and responsibilities; Have shared space for materials; Use warm ups; Have a way to help people take turns speaking and draw out quiet ones; Provide a way for participants to write down personal thoughts; Maintain a time cap.

How to Apply these Tools
makes all the difference

6.   Account and plan for additional exercises to strengthen social bonds. Building and strengthening social bonds between workshop participants helps to support stronger collaboration. This is of course harder to do virtually so we recommend spending some extra time and effort on this. This could translate to longer warm-up activities or reflection questions, a separate session focused on getting to know each other or some short collaboration exercises. Allowing for slightly longer warm up activities also gives participants the opportunity to get more comfortable with the technology.

7.   Set a safe, open, comfortable tone for your workshop in the introduction. Just like in the beginning of our usual workshops, we recommend a round of introductions in the beginning - but we included a warm up question of sharing something that made you happy this week to keep the tone especially upbeat. We also set the ground rules in the beginning as it's important to have a general baseline for interactions. At the onset, review the tech being used (Zoom and for example, Mural) and give people the opportunity to test out the functions and ensure they are comfortable. This is also a way to test microphones and make sure everyone is ready and able.

8.   Work to capture feedback to help improve your next workshop. It is important to remember that this is all a work in progress, as we all grapple with new tools and ways of working together. That's why we find it very important to always ask for feedback, reflect on what worked and what didn't, and document our learnings. One way we collect feedback is through our Connect the Dots 'Engage' platform which can be integrated within the Zoom meeting or via email immediately afterwards. We always recommend communicating back to participants as it demonstrates how their perspective is listened to and valued, which in turn builds trust.

9.   Follow generic best practice for group video calls. Some tips that we have gathered include the following. Keep your face in the direction of the microphone and speak forward. it can be distracting to have the mic go in and out. Make sure your face is entered and the background is clear and not distracting (you can even create your own background on Zoom if you don't want to show your home). Maintain professionalism but with an especially friendly air. When facilitating, you can have people raise their hands and be called on as otherwise people may cut each other off accidentally especially if there are lags. We also found it is best to ask people to stay on 'Mute' until they want to talk as otherwise there may be distracting background noise coming through. From a privacy standpoint, include a password to enter into your call.

10.   Don't forget to be a great host. Flexing your hosting muscles is even more important when your guests enter the virtual space of your meeting. Preparing the event as though it is a live event, taking into account all of the ways people should feel welcome, comfortable, confident, and appreciated, is a good way to approach online meetings. Some people may feel even more out of their element when they enter a floating-faces chat room, so set the tone for friendly interaction by making introductions, preparing casual ice-breakers, giving people ground rules, and taking gentle control of the room. People will feel comfortable knowing that you have a handle on the meeting, and will be better suited to productive discussion.

NEW SECTION
Alternative & additional tools and methods for lo-fi non-tech based interaction
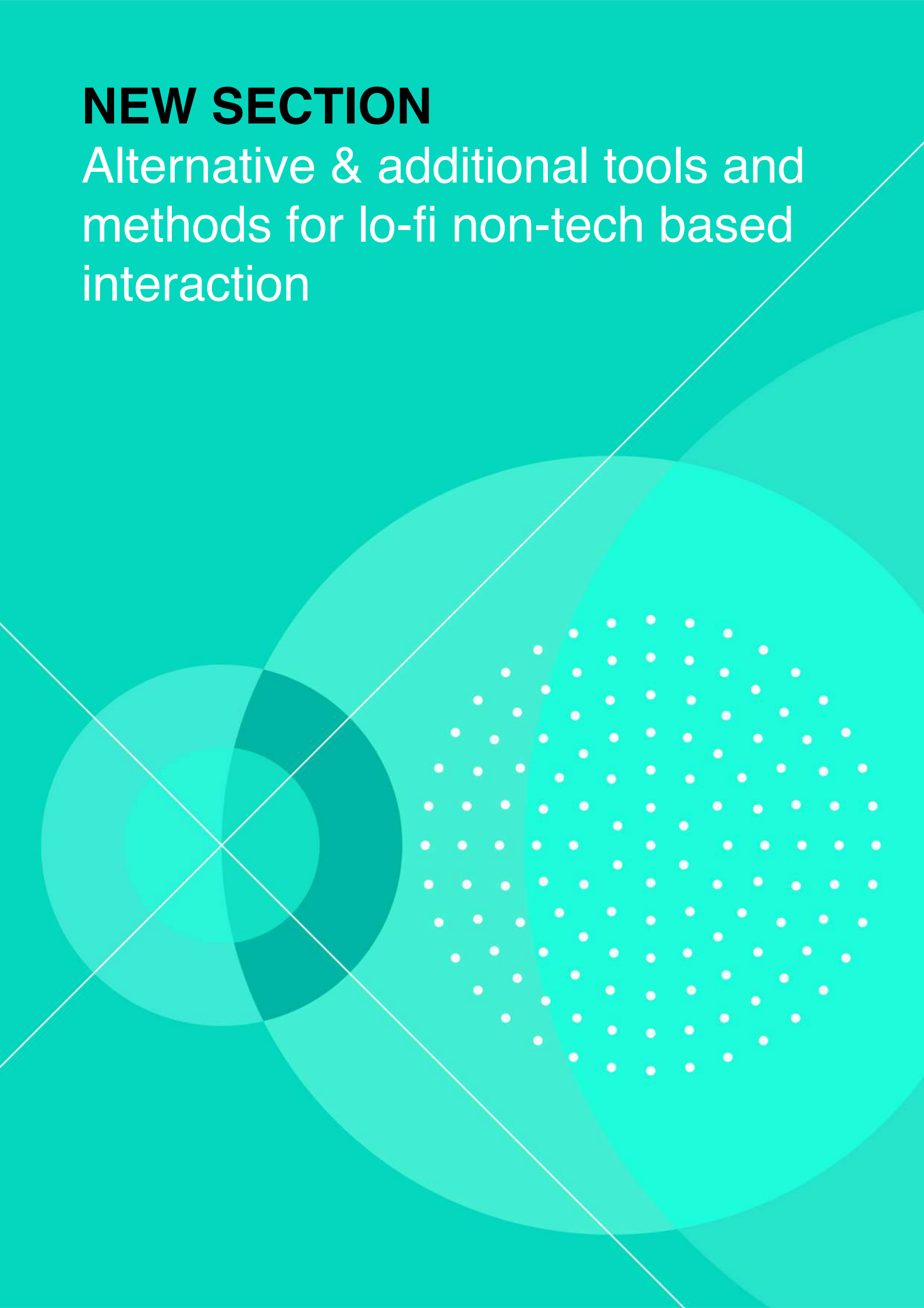
Productive & Meaningful Engagement
tackling digital literacy & accessibility

It is important to employ multiple engagement strategies, especially during a time when the most obvious solution is to move all engagement to virtual platforms. One major issue that can arise is the problem of the digital divide: a division between those who have access to and acumen for digital platforms, and those who do not. Before you create a single platform for engagement, a single app, or a method for gathering insights, it is crucial that you think about your strategy; what blend of technology or lo-fi solutions do you need to employ in order to reach all of the stakeholders involved in or impacted by the final project or decision? In an effort to tackle the challenge of reaching those who aren't just the 'usual suspects,' we have compiled some creative ideas that can be employed in your engagement strategy.

Useful resource - https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/ radicalisation_awareness_network/docs/community_empowerment_infographic_en.pdf

Things to consider
We suggest asking the following questions:

Who does your strategy, project, or plan impact once it's implemented? Conduct your own mapping and research on the demographics. Ask yourself if the online portal you're using, for example, ensures everyone can have a say: if not, what combination of things do you have the capacity to deliver on?

Can you collaborate with other organisations that might have local or specific expertise in order to find the most appropriate approach? In an effort to tackle the challenge of reaching those who aren't just the 'usual suspects'

How do you ensure that people's time contributions are valued and that they get something back in return?

What activities or interaction do you incentivise? Do the same incentives ring true in the present climate? Do you incentivise at all?

How can you find out what skills are already present in the project area and encourage people to employ those skills?

When carefully mapping community stakeholders, how are you identifying all of the relevant community nodes that you need to consult?
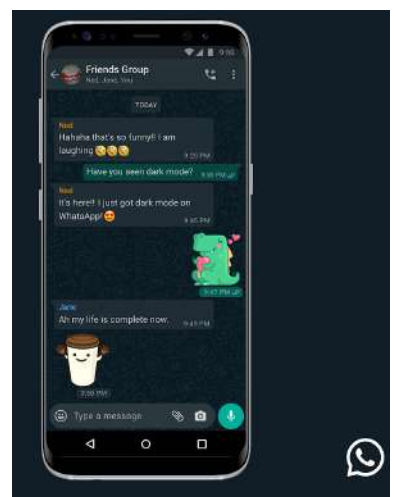
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Our Tools and Ideas

It is critical that we still leverage a mix of engagement tools, especially via different media, in order to ensure that we reach vulnerable communities and those not connected in or comfortable virtually. Here is a snapshot of ideas that we've been gathering; we will be updating this over the coming weeks.

- Community call-in radio show; radio ads for outreach
- WhatsApp (including for group video chat via phone or just regular chat groups; Zoom can also be a phone app)
- Outreach and installations with QR codes at nodes of key concentration (ie grocery stores)
- Traditional 1-1 phone calls or small group conversations via phone
- Text messaging at scale through apps like Groundsource or Reach
- Hybrid events such as digital dinners; packages with worksheets, materials to fill out alongside call-in workshop (opportunities to ensure youth-friendly with engaging, creative activities and share-backs to share their ideas)
- Neighbourhood phone trees, phone banking
- Awareness raising via sidewalk chalk announcements, partnering with local artists to create relevant murals or billboards, park signage, window signage
- Partner with food delivery, shelters, schools, churches, health workers, social workers
- Partner with tech companies to host training sessions
- Connection and collaboration with community ambassadors / representatives to reach more people; this could be done in conjunction with training to enable capacity building
- Mailing letters, surveys, flyers; potential for slot to put surveys in that follows health guidelines
- Podcasts, local TV spots
- Via community nodes such as teachers, youth workers, community groups, churches, local organisations (like community development corporations
- Engagement stations around the site or nearby in which youth / family members can move from station to station, learning about the project and sharing feedback via different interactive and playful opportunities

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Support from Connect the Dots
What we're doing to contribute and support

1. Direct (Remote) Stakeholder Engagement, Consultation Process Design & Management

The Connect the Dots team has been working intensely since mid-March collaborating across the US and Europe with thought leaders, industry innovators and our own client base to design and implement remote and online consultation tools and processes which meet the needs of our clients and partner organisations. Whether global media giants or local business districts, we continue to lead on effective and strategic stakeholder engagement in changing times.

Connect the Dots continues to design and implement end-to-end stakeholder engagement processes and we also provide consultancy and capacity building to support others who need to quickly and effectively convert to a robust remote engagement option. Our tailor-made, equitable solutions retain the key values of an in-person process, with trust as a driving force. We are currently offering:

- Virtual and non-virtual solutions that have been developed and are being rolled out in a range of contexts and environments

- A range of proprietary and non-proprietary tools used in tandem during the engagement process to ensure a high-quality participatory experience

- Insights on moving projects forward in challenging times, placemaking and effective stakeholder management

Many organisations are already engaged in face to face strategies and projects which pre-dated the COVID-19 crisis. They are now in a position where they are ready to quickly and effectively convert to a remote engagement option. Connect the Dots can offer the following:

- One-off insights and advice on the continuation of a project on a remote basis

- Access to Connect the Dots online tools and expert online facilitation to re-start a project and ensure that KPIs are met according to schedule

- Capacity building and coaching of engagement team members to ensure that they are confident and competent in the delivery of a new remote strategy

FURTHER DETAIL

Connect the Dots has developed our own 'AURIS' framework that brings together current best practices and a number of key features of tool together to enable a comprehensive [remote] engagement process. Elements include:

- Creative Tailored Virtual Insight-Gathering Events (Workshops, Focus Groups, Charrettes in creative formats from virtual community dinners to festivals)

- Connect the Dots' Engage software for accessible and interactive surveying

- Virtual Site Tours & Collaborative Mapping

- Youth-Centric Workshops

- Expert Facilitation, Communications & Visualisations

- Low-Tech and Non-Tech Engagement Options for beyond the digital divide
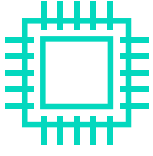
2. Connect the Dots, Insights through People: The Future of Public Spaces and Transit

The future of public spaces, public transit and how citizens will function in our cities, towns and districts is now completely unchartered territory. There is already anxiety around re-entering these spaces. A re-think is needed to ensure that these zones regain their vibrancy and civic relevancy as well as their economic benefit.

Evidence-based design and insight-informed decision making will enable the recovery of our cities. This particularly involves:

- insight-gathering and consultation to feed into the (re)design process of public space and transit system

- Data-driven strategic planning in conjunction with stakeholders

- Engagement and co-development of solutions with local businesses (specifically in relation to main street recovery)

- Once updates to the urban realm are implemented, consistent pulse-checks via observations and direct engagement to enable iterative design - to understand how people are reacting weekly, if measures are working, and why or why not

Connect the Dots has the knowledge and experience to partner on this process, to facilitate the re-imagining of these spaces and gain insights on what citizens need to create better lives in more resilient cities.

A sampling of entities we have / are working with on projects in this area include South Street Headhouse District, Dublin City Council, South Dublin Co Council, the National Disability Authority and Meath County Council in Ireland and Newtown PA, Center City District Philadelphia in the US.

3. Connect the Dots, Insights through People: Transitioning Back to Work & Shared *Spaces*

As restrictions on movement slowly ease and some employees can return to their offices on a phased basis, it is critical for employers to manage a return to high or low-density work spaces with care. An insight-driven transition process, informed through diverse and thoughtful consultation with employees is an essential part of an organisation's COVID-19 recovery plan.

Connect the Dots brings learning from extensive employee consultation work with clients such as Comcast and Independence Blue Cross to inform both workplace re-integration and re-design.

Let us work with you to apply our learnings and best practice to develop tailor-made, equitable solutions which include:

- Employee-led supports that assist the transition back to the physical workplace

- Employee-led iterative design interventions, complying with regulations but reflecting their changing needs as they transition back

- Pulse checks to understand how the transition is working, assessing employee wellbeing - this will evolve as the situation evolves

- Next steps action plan

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4. Collective Problem Solving with Diverse Stakeholders

We believe that the careful engagement of key stakeholders and leaders in a collaborative, thoughtful way is critical when approaching the challenges we are facing and the recovery process ahead. This is how the most robust and resilient solutions are found: together.

Connect the Dots can bring key stakeholders with sectors or across sectors together for collective problem solving/solution building to drive, shape, and influence responses to key challenges facing an organisation, group or region. We are currently engaged in a similar process in Philadelphia to develop a robust set of guiding principles for planning the city's COVID-19 recovery process. Suggested key tasks to create a similar process might include:

- Identification of key stakeholders and voices appropriate to solving problem – voices that are often heard to those that are not but need to be in the conversation to address it properly

- Pre event survey via Connect the Dots   Engage platform to understand key interests and drivers in advance of the first (online) gathering of the stakeholder group

- Shaping /designing a multi-step discourse to bring actionable solutions to the table and deliver concrete outcomes

- Connect the Dots facilitation throughout the process

- Key outcomes report (strategy, actions, plans) to move the needle on critical topics

- Next steps action plan

Thank you.

We are committed to playing our part in preparing solutions to this crisis through joining the dots and collaborating with inspiring organisations and people like you.

**Connect with us at
hello@connectthedots.ie**