D1.2 Scoping Study - Residents

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# Purpose of this report

This report is the D1.2 deliverable for the ITaaU network plus funded ‘Communities in the Clouds’ project. The report provides a description of the fieldwork undertaken to develop our understanding of the ways in which technology is used by high rise and high density communities. Residential developments have a large set of needs, requirements and constraints. The purpose of this document is to consider two questions set out in the project proposal[[1]](#footnote-1):

***Q1: What are the main challenges faced by high-rise communities; and of those, which can be addressed by technology?***

***Q2: How do the political/sociological and place-based characteristics of high-rise communities affect the design of supporting technological solutions?***

There were two parts to this study

1. On-site fieldwork in three London communities: *Burrells Wharf* in East London, *The Barbican* and neighbouring *Golden Lane* in Central London. This consisted of site visits and interviews with residents and staff
2. A sentiment analysis and categorisation of content from 10 online residential forums.

There was a large amount of material gathered from the study, so we have split it into two parts to distinguish between two perspectives: residents (this document) and management (see D1.1). To answer the second question, we focus on a specific a specific ‘theme’ that has arisen from our work and which is a strong candidate to benefit from technological innovation.

# The residential communities

## The Barbican

A large proportion of our work focused on the Barbican in Central London. Barbican is a large central London complex, split across 3 high-rise residential towers and 18 low-rise blocks flats.[[2]](#footnote-2) It was chosen because it has a large community (around 4000 people living in approximately 2000 apartments), it is well established (opened in 1969), it has enjoyed a relatively recent resurgence in popularity, resulting in a mix of early local authority tenants and private housing: urban professionals and families with children[[3]](#footnote-3). Our initial perusal of their online forum, [www.barbicantalk.com](http://www.barbicantalk.com), showed a vocal community that is tackling and responding to a wide range of interesting challenges.

## Golden Lane

Golden Lane sits adjacent to the Barbican. It is a 1950s council housing complex, comprising mainly of studio and one bedroom flats. It houses approximately 1500 people, with many flats now privately owned. There is a larger proportion of council and housing association tenants than in the Barbican. It sits adjacent to the Barbican complex, and, as with the Barbican, its Grade II listed status and central location makes it a sought-after residence.

## Burrells Wharf

Burrells Wharf[[4]](#footnote-4) is a riverside residential community in London’s Docklands area. It consists of eleven separate buildings, three of which are Grade II listed. It is built upon the shipyard site where the Great Eastern steamship was launched in 1850. It has an onsite gym, pool and concierge. The development consists of privately owned housing, with a mix of owners and tenants. As with the two other developments it has a vibrant and established online community.

**Full transcripts from interviews and fieldwork notes can be obtained by contacting Tom Lodge (thomas.lodge@nottingham.ac.uk).**

This study focuses on the current onsite resident communities (tenants and onsite owners) rather than the wider affiliated community (previous tenants, landlords, police, management, future tenants, tourists, staff, local businesses etc). The D1.1 Workshop Report provides a summary overview from the point of view of management companies.

## Community Influences

The first part of this study presents an examination of **the Barbican** and the factors that most influence the community and communal activity. The Barbican is an ideal environment to study as it is well established, large and complex; as a result there are large numbers of drivers for community engagement. The Barbican estate offers an unusually large number of resources. It has an arts centre with two theatres, exhibition spaces, a music pit and three cinemas. It has a library, a nearby church and private communal gardens. All of the facilities alongside most of the estate’s grounds (except some private gardens) are open to and shared with the wider public. The factors that emerged as having an influence on the community were *architecture, resources, local knowledge/experience,* and *shared ideology/interests.* There are a rich set of channels of information that arise from, and underpin the resultant community processes which we briefly summarise at the end of this section.

### Architecture

The Barbican’s association with arts and iconic architecture appear to influence the perceptions of what it is to be a Barbican resident. When questioned on the reasons for first moving to the Barbican, all mentioned the architecture, and several expressed the idea that the architecture engendered polarising ‘love it or hate it’ views:

*“the fact they’re living there suggests that they have at least a tolerance for and more likely an appreciation of modern architecture”[resident3?]*

*“both estates are surrounded by office blocks it does give it a particular identity maybe. Maybe that identity helps forge people together a little bit”*

But the features of the architecture were also seen to more directly determine the likelihood of fostering relationships with neighbours. All interviewees **attached importance to ad-hoc encounters as a way of building relationships**. Where residents had lived in more than one apartment in the Barbican, they spoke of distinct differences in the opportunities for engagement and interaction arising from the qualities of communal space.

*“In [block] we had a central corridor and everybody’s front door was of it to the left and right so you have this shared space. You saw people coming and going that was different to [another block] where I had my own door which was onto the carpark, so other than my immediate next door neighbour I rarely saw neighbours” - Resident4*

*“In terms of meeting people [...] I think it also varies a little bit by the configuration of the block as well. For example, some of the blocks they’re corridor blocks [...] I think that naturally means that you tend to ...you physically see your neighbours more often. Whereas this configuration, I see my opposite occasionally, but clearly it takes more of an effort to see the ones upstairs or downstairs” [Resident3]*

*“I love the fact that you can know your neighbours. You can smile at them in the corridor, but when you close your door there’s no garden fence for them to be watching you over or whatever and I like that” [Resident1]*

*“What I like about this one is that our corridor is a shared corridor. If you go in [another block], it’s like the Shining. – [Resident1]*

The Barbican Estate sits within a central location. However most interviewees suggest that the physical layout and ‘inward looking’ buildings insulated the community from external influences; something that they **suggest** **is a negative aspect** of the development:

*“it’s a little bubble of a community, which sometimes can feel quite divorced from the real world” [Resident1]*

*“I guess the Barbican Estate is quite inward looking because it was designed as a sort of city within a city with the links to other surrounding roads notoriously bad” [Resident3]*

*“We’ve got local, residents only areas, which makes it quite inclusive...well, inclusive of all residents, but exclusive of everybody else. Especially like this part of the estate is every inward looking.” [Resident4]*

*“the Barbican ends up having a very skewed view of what life is like actually” [?Resident4?]*

Buildings and resources in the Barbican Estate are linked together by a complex array of walkways. It can take considerable effort to learn to navigate it effectively, and this local knowledge is a key factor in establishing a distinction between residents and outsiders (who are free to wander the majority of the Barbican development):

*“It feels like it was built to be obstructive and be difficult to get around and it feels like it was built to shield its residents from the more nefarious areas that are around here” [resident2]*

*“I’m not sure if this is a myth or not [..]it’s a bit of a maze to navigate and you often get lost and I heard that was by design so that outsiders like criminals can’t come in and then mug people or rob you because there’s no easy get away” [resident4]*

*“[..] the whole layout needing special yellow lines to follow so people didn’t get lost.” [Resident3]*

*“[..]every time I’d come to the Barbican centre I’d got lost and I thought I hate the Barbican, but now I love it.”* [*Resident1*]

*“ [..] you can tell people who live here versus tourists because you know your way around. You can spot other residents almost.” [Resident4]*

Within the larger Barbican community, sets of smaller communities have emerged which are delineated by residential block. This is reflected in the management structure (with each block having a representative), certain rituals and traditions associated with particular blocks and private block-level resources such as websites.

*“I have two friends who live in [block], the block behind, and they have someone who does a blog just for [block]. [..]” [Resident1]*

The Barbican has eight acres of well maintained gardens and lakes, some of which are enclosed by surrounding terraces and private to residents. As well serving to differentiate the Barbican from other central London residential developments, these and are clearly important spaces for communal activity; often used for community events (children’s parties, resident meetings) and leisure:

*“We’re in the centre of London, but there’s two peaceful gardens and there’s a lake” [Resident3]*

*“I was sitting under a tree down there because it was so humid and there were lots of mothers and a few dads with their young kids. It was a really nice atmosphere, much nicer than being in a completely public park” [Resident1]*

*“...if one person’s going to go and hang out in the garden, we’ll sort of email or text around” [Resident4]*

*“...having gardens is quite...I think people are always shocked when they come round and they see that there’s gardens here and it’s very green” [Resident2]*

### Resources

The Barbican is unusual in the number and quality of resources that it has available to it. Although the theatres, cinemas and exhibitions are open to the general public, Barbican residents benefit from private views of exhibitions and local discounts[[5]](#footnote-5). Though this may create a perception amongst residents of a shared interest in theatre and the arts, the extent to which this acts as a vehicle for community engagement is uncertain:

*“I don’t get the feeling that most people from the Barbican, who live in the Barbican, come and hand out here or go to the galleries that often. So I think it’s like we live round the Centre, but because we have other accesses we don’t use it”* *[Resident2]*

*“I also wonder whether people who have moved here have been slightly attracted by the arts side as well” [Resident3]*

The exclusivity of the community is entangled with its identity. Beyond mentioning the high prices (which all interviewees do), they all pointed to certain extravagance in the levels of service enjoyed by residents; three mentioned daily rubbish collection as an illustration:

*“Just the upkeep here, which is paid for, just gives the sort of illusion that everybody’s helping out a bit more...like the fact that you get your rubbish taken every day, rather than weekly or fortnightly elsewhere makes a big difference” [Resident4]*

*“Another thing that I think is a great...it’s a really good thing is we just have to put our rubbish outside our front door or in the little cubbyhole there [..]. And it’s collected every day except the weekend [Resident1]*

*“The service that you get from living here is like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. You have all these attendants who take your rubbish out of a little box in your front door” [Resident2]*

Others point (positively) to services that they believe are rare in residential communities: parking attendants, post and parcel pickup and gardeners and access to high quality facilities (local police, dentists, doctors). The interviews suggest that alongside the pride in the services the Barbican offers, there is an underlying unease in the status that the services infer: some were quick to link the high standards of service to a sheltered and privileged existence. This is perhaps more stark and persistent given the contrast offered by the immediate locality:

*“I think, generally speaking, residents have very good services. There’s no crime here. We get our bags picked up. We’ve got nothing to worry about particularly. And because of that we don’t push for other things [..] I say things like ‘why don’t we link with the Golden Lane Estate because actually we could all have a big party in the gardens because that might get more people involved’ To which one of them replied, ‘Why on Earth would we want more people involved?” [Resident5]*

*“We have incredible hospitals and doctors and dentists around here. [...] It makes me feel a bit bad about that because the rest of London’s got such a terrible...it’s having so many problems with, but we’ve got a really good health system” [Resident2]*

*“We’ve got local, residents only areas, which makes it quite inclusive...well, inclusive of all residents, but exclusive of everyone else” [Resident4]*

*“There is no crime in the Barbican. And yet, because people’s experience is so, generally speaking, very, very sheltered the Barbican has this completely skewed view of what life is like actually [...] I think it just gives people a context in which to operate that is completely unreal really”*

*“It feels like it’s too well maintained for the small number of people who can actually see it”*

### Local knowledge / experience

*“sense of identity living with people with same experience*”[alasair]

Residents appear to be keenly attuned to the unspoken traditions of Barbican living:

*“Everyone has the same flowers and that’s another unspoken things. I don’t know what the flowers are called, it’s a certain type of flower. But it makes me feel happy that everybody...it’s almost like everyone communicates using what can be seen publicly and it’s kind of people saying ‘Yeah we live here we love it here’” [Resident2]*

*“Every flat on the line that we live on has got a duck ornament or duck painting in the window. It’s almost like an unwritten rule that this line here is about ducks. So we’ve just put some duck paintings up” [Resident2]*

*“We’ve got privacy screens. It’s very very frowned upon for people to look around the privacy screens” [Resident5]*

*“There’s this unwritten rule that if you’re going to put flowers on your balcony they’re red” [Resident2]*

Beyond this implicit coordination and positive influence on the surrounding spaces, there is the suggestion that a sense of shared experience can emerge from the particular foibles/peculiarities/processes of living in the Barbican; these may play a part in establishing community identity through ‘in jokes’ and a ‘shared language’.

*[..] all the problems you get from living here...people...It’s kind of the fabric of it. So it’s like a running joke that when it rains all of our flats stink because the drains come up. [..] I think it’s nice to feel that there’s all of these people who’ve been going through the same thing over and over again and it’s become part of the pattern of the Barbican” [Resident2]*

Familiarity / awareness of the Barbican’s peculiarities is important enough to bear some influence on lettings; of the two tenants interviewed, both suggest that prior experience of the Barbican (both had rented there before) clinched the decision to lease them the flat. Their assumption was that it demonstrated an acceptance and appreciation of Barbican’s listed status and resulted in less ‘stuff’ to explain:

*“anecdotally this landlady said as well, once you’re in the Barbican, they will more likely rent to someone who knows it” [Resident4]*

*“Because we’d moved from another place in the Barbican they said they wanted us to live there because we understood the Barbican” [Resident2]*

*“the more you know the less you have to be explained to so they preferred somebody who was knowledgeable about the Barbican” [Resident4]*

Finally, one particularly stand-out community process – (‘strange informal thing that everyone in Barbican knows about’- Resident2) that has been used by three interviewees to illustrate a distinctive feature of Barbican living (and to offer some context on the typical Barbican ‘resident’) is monitoring and recycling of bulky items in the Barbican’s bin stores. A section of the bin store is used for bulky items such as unwanted furniture, fixtures and fittings. There is a shared understanding that fellow residents may take (often very good quality) items for themselves before they are taken away by the council:

*“When people refurbish or redo their flat, they encourage you, rather than throwing it away, to put it into the salvage so that people who want to keep the original fixtures and fittings...you put it there so people can use it” [Resident4]*

### Shared interests and values

Given the size of the Barbican there are sufficient numbers of residents to form sub-communities around shared values and interests. There are many examples of calls on the forum, either advertising an event, or looking for participants. Some are around interests directly related to the development such as historical walks and open gardens; others are unrelated: LGBT meet-ups, expectant parents, 5-aside football, string quartets, ‘creatives’ etc. A more detailed breakdown can be found at:

http://upintheclouds.org/viz/barbican/ (select categories, then select ‘social’).

## Information sources

Given the communities that emerge from the features described above, we provide a quick summary of the information channels that are used to advertise and manage them. This is useful as a way of illustrating the ad-hoc nature of communication, and understanding its weaknesses and it gives some sense of how the channels have developed over time. We distinguish between three different sources of information: management (the council, the barbican estate, residents committees etc.), residents, third parties (local businesses, advertisers, researchers etc).

**Management**

Management includes the City of London (responsible for managing the Barbican estate), the council and the various Resident initiated management committees. There were seven channels of communication in evidence:

* Emails

The Barbican’s onsite estate office uses email broadcasts to update residents; however this information is mirrored by notices because not all residents are online.

* Notices on noticeboard

*“they still put notices up on the board because not everyone is on email or online. Especially, I think the more elderly who live here. I think it’s important to have notices” [resident1]*

*“Apparently in some blocks their notices disappear” [resident1]*

* Local magazines

(Magazines: “Barbican Life”,)

Main one is Barbican Life (run by residents (through Barbican Association), published quarterly and carrying adverts. Mainly features/lifestyle rather than anything related to the management of the estate. Seems that in its original form it was called “Barbican Resident”, but it became “grossly unpopular with a number of residents through the stance it took on Barbican Estate Management.” Estate Management issues are contained in the BA Newsletter, also published quarterly.

*Of the number of pages in the current autumn issue, namely fifty two, there appear exactly forty seven advertisements! [Resident1]*

* Newsletters:

(“Estate office newsletter”, Barbican Association newsletter (replaces Barbican Resident!), one from city (residents of the city) and one from alderman and “The podium” (http://www.barbican.org.uk/about-barbican/residents)

* Closed forums

Working parties and subcommittees use closed forums to communicate, exchange documents and ideas, and keep the momentum going between meetings.

* Face to face
* Social media

*The Barbican Association has a twitter account but it’s very infrequent and it’s not very interesting. We don’t use social media very much at all really [Resident5]*

**Residents**

* Forum (barbicantalk)
* Local websites

Barbican mums, blog in Ben Johnson house,[*http://barbicanarea.co.uk*](http://barbicanarea.co.uk)

* Magazines
* Noticeboard (controlled and sanctioned by estate)
* Social Media,

*“I’ve used What’s app with groups of friends sometimes, but then I think it would become really unwieldy. You can’t be using it with dozens of people. It would be constantly beeping the whole time wouldn’t it?” [Resident3]*

*“I occasionally see things on twitter, but I usually know about them already by the time I see them on there”[Resident1]*

* face to face.

**Third parties**

* Forum,
* Barbican Magazine

There are also a couple of magazines distributed to the wider area (i.e. not specifically affiliated with the Barbican): “City Magazine”, “City View”

*“In case anyone didn't get today's junk mailing inside the "City Resident" magazine”*

*“Then perhaps refrain from sending FOUR copies of its magazine to the same household, thus generating unwanted and unnecessary printing postage and waste paper.”*

* Flyers / Junk Mail

*“Has anybody had any success in trying to stop the relentless influx of unsolicited mail that we seem to get shoved through our letterboxes?”[Resident5]*

In short, residents are exposed to a large range of information; and pick and choose base upon the relative importance attached to each. There is a suggestion that information received directly from residents is likely to be more relevant:

*“The estate office maybe are not au fait with some of those issues as people who deal with it all the time” [Resident1]*

# Defining a residential community

Our work with the Barbican illustrates that residential communities are best viewed as a set of multiple overlapping communities, each formed to a different set of influences or motivations. In this section we present a categorisation the list of sub-communities that exist in the Barbican (and other residential development). The purpose is to provide a way of reasoning about residential developments in a way that exposes (often competing) interests and motivations. Technology design for residential communities is challenging because the empowerment of one or more individuals can be at the expense of others; the tension is most keenly felt between the management and residents, but as the table illustrates below, there are many ‘hybrid’ communities that will have their own particular requirements and vulnerabilities.

We distinguish between the following characteristics:

* **Glue**: What binds the community together (i.e. ideology, common situation / interest etc)
* **Commodity**: What does this community offer, what are its strengths?
* **Fragility**: This relates to the life expectancy of a particular community, judged as high/medium/low:
  + High: temporary or small community, reliant on just a few and liable to disappear in the medium term
  + Medium: Likely to exist for the medium to long term, but reliant on one or a few individuals
  + Low: Long term, established community unlikely to disappear; large in size and many contributing members.
* **Tensions:** What are the main issues that come to bear on these communities?
* **Enactment:** How is community enacted (i.e. online/meetups/ad-hoc).

The following table categorises each sub community according to the characteristics set out above. The size of the communities runs from largest to smallest:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Community*** | ***Glue*** | ***Strength*** | ***Commodity*** | ***Fragility*** | ***Tensions*** | ***Enactment*** |
| Neighbourhood | Space | Weak | Knowledge | High | Council, Local businesses, Planning | Online, |
| Tenants | Space | Medium | Knowledge , Skills, Time | Low | Landlords (owners), Fellow occupants, Management | Online, Formal Meetings, |
| Owners | Liability/Investment | Weak | Time | Low | Tenants, Management | Online, |
| Occupants | Space | Medium | Knowledge , Skills, Time | Low | Fellow occupants, Management, Local Environment | Online, |
| Block | Space/Situation | Medium | Knowledge , Skills, Time | Low | Fellow Occupants, Management | Online, Adhoc meetings |
| Shared interest | Social | Strong | Knowledge , Skills, Time | Medium |  | Online, |
| Shared activity | Social/Situation | Strong | Knowledge, Skills | High |  | Online, |
| Shared irritant | Irritant/Situation | Strong | Pressure | High | Irritant, Process | Online, |
| Campaign | Campaign | Strong | Pressure, Knowledge, Skills, Time | Low | Campaign Subject, Fellow Campaigners | Online |

Table : Residential Communities

# Community Introspection

One interesting theme that emerged from our work was the perception that a resident holds of his/her community. When asked to describe the community, all had a strong sense of both how the community is now and how it has changed over time. This is consistent with our forum analysis work; a typical refrain is to compare (often unfavourably) a perception of the current state against a perception of a past state. The extent to which the viewpoint is accurate is unclear, though the answers from residents suggest a few inconsistent viewpoints.

*“there’s a preponderance of certain professions in the Barbican. Architects is an obvious one. I gather there’s quite a lot of creative who live here*” [Resident4]

*“It’s very mixed really. It think that people that move here have a certain income because its very expensive. [..] So it’s quite mixed.. In terms of nationalities as well, very mixed. [..] So I think the demographic is very mixed both in terms of income and nationality*” [Resident1]

*“Mainly white middle class” –* [Resident5]

*“Large mix of income ranges and skills and more families recently” [Resident3]*

Residents also appear to have a keen sense and interest in how their community is viewed from the outside, which they believe to be at odds with reality:

*“I think the impression is that the Barbican is very wealthy” [Resident1]*

*“I think it’s got a sense of itself” “You know that whenever you speak to people about where you’re living ... they’ll have a belief as to what it’s like there” [Resident2]*

A surprising and interesting outcome from our interviews was the work that residents undertake to assess the ‘health’ of a community, and the wide variety of informal cues/observations used to make this judgement. The following table summarises the criteria for judging health and, where relevant the work undertaken to establish a view.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Health indicator |  | Notes |
| Number of people living in the estate | [resident2/resident5] | observation of groups of people in the communal gardens  count number of lights on and walk around to see how many flats seem empty [Resident2]. |
| Meeting neighbours | [resident4 / resident5 /resident3 / resident1] | the frequency of chance meetings / chats. |
| Participation in formal processes | [resident5] | Responses to questionnaires. How many people turn up to meetings. |
| Renters versus Owners | [resident5] | “I think evidence suggests that when people rent the level of community involvement etc. fall.  The reason renters get involved in local issues beyond their own flat is when something is wrong. |
| How happy people look in the garden. | [resident4] | Some signs that say ‘no ball games’ [resident4 pg 15] – I don’t want ball games but don’t want signs banning them as petty. |
| Responses on forum (barbican talk) | [resident3, resident1]. | “Serves as the personality of the barbican”. [Resident3] |

Table Metrics for assesing community health

Emerging strongly from these interviews is the notion that residents have a keen sense of community; that it is important to them, and that some notion of ‘community health’ emerges as a consequence of a variety of informal observations (and processes).

# Civic engagement and Governance

In this section we have picked out a core theme: ‘Civic engagement and Governance’ where we believe technology has a bigger part to play in supporting high rise residential communities. We present our observations and a set of recommendations for the design of supporting technology.

Many of the structures and processes of governance have evolved with the ebb and flow of residents, management and situation. Online tools have a part to play, often as a complement to physical meetings and formal processes. In this section we are concerned with two related and overlapping types of governance: **consultation** (i.e. processes around decision making) and **problem resolution** (i.e. fixing damaged resources, dealing with noise, anti-social behaviour, water leaks and so on).

Often residents will need to work together to resolve issues and support consultation to steer a development’s future. In order to support collective decision making, they will often set up groups to formally represent the wider community. The workings, the structure of these groups and the legal power that they may exert will differ from community to community. In the simplest case there may be no residential committees or groups at all; the land owner (freeholder) and management company (responsible for upkeep of the grounds and property) may deal with each resident on a case by case basis. More established communities are highly likely to set up groups to deal with concerns that affect all (service charges / property issues / freeholder issues etc). Participation is typically voluntary.

In the case of the Barbican, its governance structures are at the more complex[[6]](#footnote-6) end of the spectrum; more so than typical; likely as a result of its age, large population, residents, number of buildings, public-facing resources (arts centre, library, gardens, walkways), its grade II listed status and its central city location. Each of the 21 separate buildings has its own House Group. The City of London (responsible for the overall management of the Barbican Estate) will communicate directly with the House Group on matters such as building works and services. The Barbican Consultation Committee is a wider umbrella group that represents the voice of all Barbican residents; it is the main vehicle communication with the Corporation of London (the estate landlord). The Barbican Residential Committee is the entity to which the Corporation of London delegates responsibility for management of the estate. Daily onsite management is undertaken by the Barbican Estate office.

Regardless of the level of complexity of the management structures, in most cases the majority of formal decision making will still occur at physical meetings. Our work suggests that ‘traditional’ online services: emails, mailing lists and forums are used to communicate around meetings, to report back or prepare; given the challenges of governing in these environments it begs the question whether technology can and should play a more central role.

We begin by setting out the main challenges that emerged from our study that impact upon the way a building is governed: deliberation, self-efficacy and skills/time and remuneration. For each of these challenges we set out one or more **recommendations** that we believe should be core to the development of a supporting technical system.

### Deliberation

Technology may be used as a vehicle for a two-stage democratic process of high quality deliberation leading to a definitive outcome. We know it has the potential to increase the numbers involved in discussions, by lowering barriers to participation. Tsagarousianou argues that ‘new technologies clearly have the potential to sustain such places [public spheres] as they enable both deliberation and ‘hearing’ (citizen to authority communication)’[[7]](#footnote-7). Yet, critics have suggested that online environments will undermine deliberation; that: ‘there is a real danger that ICTs will not only reflect but amplify the fragmentation of the public sphere, balkanising politics into multifarious and shifting constituencies’[[8]](#footnote-8) i.e. online environments are more likely to polarise and self-enforce than they are to persuade or shift opinion. Between the critics and optimists is a view presented by Wright and Street[[9]](#footnote-9) that argues that it is the *design* of the online tools that will most shape the character of deliberative discussion; rather than online tools per se. This is a compelling notion; **can we ‘*design out’* the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of online deliberation for residential communities?**

In this section we first provide a quick examination of some of the challenges of deliberation that emerged from our study of residential forums. It’s worth noting that in all of the online environments that we looked at, **none were set up for formal policy making or consultation**; i.e. there is no explicit assumption amongst residents that their discussions will have a concrete impact on policy. Nevertheless there are still many examples of the forum being used as a deliberative medium; our interviews and forum analysis suggest that residents are *aware that the forum is read by people with the power to enact policy change*. Discussions around policy are not necessarily framed in an initial post; they may emerge later on as a consequence of the way a discussion has unfolded.

#### Challenge one: Polarisation and acrimony

The following comments were all taken from a single forum thread related to the issue of noisy toddlers / young children in the Barbican.

*“I was just showing this forum to a colleague at work, and she commented "How awful, how can you live with such intolerant people."*

*“I not sure all this Banter is helping here and views seem to be ever more polarizing.”*

*“As much as I like Barbican, when I see comments like this, I am happy I am leaving soon.”*

*“Clicked on this post by accident - it's still depressing.”*

*“This whole debate is really getting very tired now, and totally pointless.”*

Beyond (or perhaps as a result of) challenging debate around emotive topics, there is evidence of residents holding general (often dispassionate) views on individuals or groups

*“Busy body people pedantic about everything. They’ve created fake hierarchical structures [Resident2]”*

*“I think of the Barbican Association General Council”, some people are on that [..] they don’t do anything else. They don’t work [..] They like meeting people. [Resident5]*

*On one hand a bunch of pedantic busybodies that like to moan, but on the other hand – genuine issues around consultation and need to have a voice. [Resident2]*

*“Some people they’re just negative about everything and I..and very..how shall I put it...sort of self absorbed and complain about things that I..I..I think they take a lot for granted basically” [Resident1]*

*Very often you’ve got one or two people who are really, really obsessive about it. Their voice always gets heard at the expense of the people… [Concierge1]*

It appears that some of this discomfort is a result of physical meetings and a bad experience:

*“The last Barbican Association meeting I went to got incredibly acrimonious and it was because we had the then City planner there and there was just a right argument and I just did not like the way things went” [resident1]*

*Regarding Barbican Association General Counsel meetings or any other meetings here, if you don’t fit into that [white middle class] category, then it can be an uncomfortable experience.*

*“Talking about the [] lobby refurbishments. Considerable costs the managing agent have had in a interior designer who we’ve presented her plans once. It turned into a slinging match. It was really, really quite unpleasant. There were a few people who timidly said, “I really like that.” They were frightened to say because of their neighbours. It was an unpleasant experience”. [Concierge1]*

Crucially interviews suggest that, only one of a few poor experiences can lead users to become **disengaged from future participation** and even provide sufficient disincentive to contribute in smaller ways (e.g. post to the forum):

*“I rarely post anything [...] anymore because I just got fed up with people posting stupid things or dumb things or just things that annoyed me” [Resident5]*

*“No, I tend not to reply just because I don’t want to get into a discussion. It’s more, I like it as a noticeboard, rather than a discussion” [Resident4]*

*“It’s partly because sometimes I don’t like the tone of it. People can get quite snipey with each other and it puts me off posting too often” [Resident1]*

***“****It seems that in some of my postings I may have overstepped the mark and caused offence. This was never my intention and I am sorry if this has happened. I have therefore voluntarily deleted those messages which might fall into this category. [....] This is not something that I am comfortable with hence my removal of my postings and, for what it is worth, my withdrawal from this forum.” [Forum entry]*

*“The mass deletions a few days ago, [...], were kinda understandable although I fear they may have resulted in one of our number leaving the forum for good.” [Forum entry]*

#### Challenge two: Contentment

Theories of *agnonism* in political design present disagreement and confrontation as perpetual states[[10]](#footnote-10) that are advantageous to the democratic process in encouraging ideas to be reassessed, reconsidered and improved over time. Buildings and the communities within them are continuously subject to an overwhelming number of influences; most of which will benefit from scrutiny from those most implicated. One of the advantages of increasing community participation, even if divisive, is an improved potential to positively influence both the immediate environment and the one beyond the bounds of the immediate community. Arguably, a sense of contentment with the status quo can act as an impediment to raising social capital:

*“[..] people feel quite content. We’ve never done that so why would we start to do that?” [Resident5]*

*“They have votes every year but it’s the same people because no-one else goes up for election” – [Resident2]*

*“the decisions generally speaking that we take revolve around the no change option” [resident5]*

*“Once the issue is resolved, people then fade back out because, generally speaking, it all works” [resident5]*

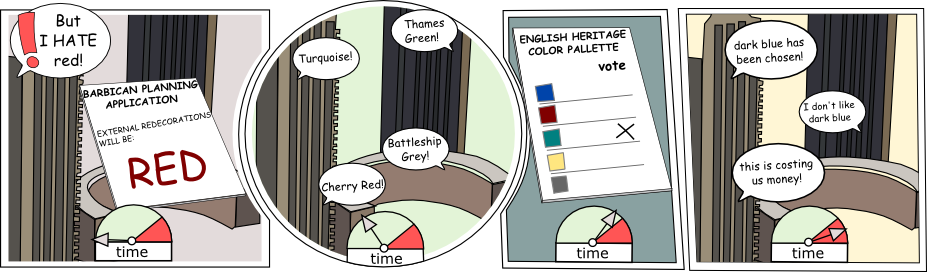
*“There’s a palette of colours. But we just ended up with what we had before [..] I have no idea if people voted. I think sometimes there’s a huge apathy with that kind of thing”*

*“It would be great to have more people engaged, but I wonder how many people choose to live in a large estate so they can let someone else worry about maintenance etc and get on with their lives!” [Forum entry]*

Herein lies a core tension in designing technology to support deliberation in these communities. We have seen that disagreement is a powerful incentive for participation (many of the longer, more active threads in the forums are as a result of conflicting views), but, if left unchecked can also disincentivise future participation. If the proportion of residents posting on residential forums is an indicator of overall community participation, it would suggest that the levels are typically low. Our works suggests that a general feeling of contentment may act as a barrier to participation (we also consider self-efficacy later in this document). It is also perhaps easy to confuse ‘contentment’ (i.e. I’m blissfully happy) with apathy (i.e. I’m not content but don’t know what to do / cannot be bothered to do anything about it). To address both we must (i) effectively publicise the problems/issues/opportunities (ii) provide clear and effective means of tackling them. The second part is crucial, there is a real danger of undermining a community by reminding people of issues without providing an effective means to act upon them.

#### Challenge three: bikeshedding

Even if we achieve high levels of participation in deliberation; there is a further challenge in ensuring that the quality and quantity of deliberation matches the intended outcomes.



In 1957 C. Northcote Parkinson, a British naval historian observed a phenomenon amongst a committee of people responsible for approving plans for the development of a nuclear power plant, who would spend greater time and energy on trivial issues (what materials to use for the staff bike shed) than they would the more complex yet more consequential issues at the heart of the power plant design. His ‘Law of triviality’[[11]](#footnote-11), sometimes known as ‘*bikeshedding’* presents an argument that in lowering the amount of domain expertise required to contribute to a discussion, a greater number of opinions will be expressed, and greater corresponding time and effort wasted at the expense of more important, challenging issues. One forum post sums this up well:

*Ask us to study, say, all the CrossRail papers, and most of us will melt away, while grateful to those few who stay.  But ask us to express a preference about the colour of our flats and a far greater number will not only take an interest but will also have a valid view.[Forum entry]*

The complexity and importance of decisions in residential developments will fall on a wide spectrum; many decisions will require a deep level of knowledge and expertise in order to make informed judgements. Others, such as what colour to paint communal areas, are simpler to understand and contribute to. Arguably it is more likely that a **disproportionate amount of time and cost will be expended on more trivial issues to accommodate, present and take into account the larger volume of opinion.**

**Recommendations for designing to improve online deliberation:**

**Recommendation:** Clearly distinguish between tools for online deliberation (leading to formal outcomes) and tools for general discussion and socialising.

**Recommendation**: **continually publicise** the **problems/issues/opportunities** alongside clear and **effective means of tackling them.**

**Recommendation:** **Ensure that tools employed in collaborative decision making are appropriate to the topics that are being addressed.**  For example, input into the more trivial plans should be scoped and tightly constrained to promote a timely outcome. More complex issues should be framed by appropriate context and allow more open, deliberative discussion.

**Recommendation: (i) Reveal and support deliberative discussion around mutual concerns whilst (ii) insulating from corrosive effects due to confrontation and (iii) leading towards a conclusion: action or agreement.** One part of fulfilling (ii) may be support for anonymity to reduce the likelihood of online or offline coercion.

### Self-Efficacy

Carol et al[[12]](#footnote-12) show a strong link between a sense of collective efficacy - the belief that actions can genuinely influence outcomes – and levels of participation and engagement. Taylor et al[[13]](#footnote-13) present an argument that a major challenge to creating a culture of collective efficacy is down to “consultation fatigue”, where participants in a consultation process will lose the desire to participate if they feel that their views will have no discernible influence on any outcomes:

*What you need to have with that though is evidence that its being listened to because if people are just doing these things and they see absolutely no evidence of anything happening as a result it, they’re just not going to bother. [Managingagent1]*

Our study suggests a certain degree of cynicism on the processes employed to govern communities and their own abilities to influence outcomes. We observed several factors that contribute to this problem: *Limited influence* and *parochialism*

#### Limited influence

There is evidence that many resident feel a deep frustration that their views are not sufficiently taken account of by management:

*I think people realize that it actually doesn’t in the end do anything because it might then eventually get accepted under the agenda of the board, but the board has probably got too many other things to think about and it just dies. [Llandlord1]*

*“I wonder if this noticeable change is because residents have developed a sense of helplessness/powerlessness to effect change around here such that they feel their contributions/opinions/views/voices don't matter to Management” [Wharf point]*

*“I’d like to feel that the voice had a bit more strength behind it” “It would make the conversation a little less meaningless’ [Barbican Forum entry]*

*“There’s not really much transparency that comes back. There’s all these things which we want to happen; they get thrown over the wall and maybe in two years time we’ll hear something back. But yeah, it can be quite frustrating.” [Resident2]*

A subset of this frustration is a result of the complexity of the structures and processes involved in management; there is some evidence to suggest that as a result of this complexity, residents distrust the motivations behind decisions:

*I have a theory that the City has created a complex set of structures to tie up would-be resident activists and stifle democratic interference and scrutiny of its core activities. [Barbican forum entry]*

*“we don’t get to vote in the council election..well, we do, but it’s for aldermen. It’s not a political thing and I do fidn that quite frustrating. I would like to be able to vote properly and I can’t” [resident1]*

*“Companies are more powerful than the people in the city” [Resident2]*

*“Barbican Residents Association should have a seat, or a voting seat, in the council..at least present an alternative or at least present the slightly more human kind of look at things”- [Resident2]*

*“Unfortunately, the people being advised by the BA working groups/specialists are often not experts themselves, and take the decisions in a way heavily influenced by priorities that may not align with the residents, or the expert advice - i.e. there are broader corporate agendas to be fulfilled (provision of arts services, spending particular budgets by particular dates, using particular contractors, etc) that take precedence over 'expert advice' on what would be the best outcome (in the interests of the residents).” [Forum entry]*

*“the Corporation doesn't represent the interests of residents: rather, it represents the interest of the banks and lawyers of the financial services industry. And these banks and lawyers have no interest in providing a community room for residents.” [Forum entry]*

#### Parochialism

*Leasees are generally just very selfish. They want what they want. They want what they expect, whether it’s a parking space outside their flat, whether it’s nice, bright colours in the hallways, whatever it is. [managingagent1]*

Typically, the processes employed by residents committees aren’t well geared to deal with cases where issues affect only a small portion of residents (a block, a floor, or a single resident); in time-starved meetings, it is more common for issues that affect greater numbers to receive a greater priority, regardless of how significant the issue affecting the smaller numbers may be.

*“Many feel that the development is controlled by a select few that really do not want to hear what others want and when something is raised it is selectively answered, points ignored or nothing done. I’ve been on the receiving end of this myself and hence you just think why bother and get on with more important things.”*

*“I have a belief that unless those who are directly affected are closely involved things are unlikely to progress either quickly or appropriately”*

*“But also on like a small issue that was kind of important to the, but maybe less so to other people and I just thought, “Oh this is really tedious” [resident1]*

*“in some of the blocks, there are new builds going on and they can be quite..really kind of a negative factor for the people living in the block right next to them” [Forum entry]*

*“How come such a tiny number of residents can put a spanner in the works for the rest of us? Please, not more delays!” [Forum entry]*

**Recommendations for improving self-efficacy:**

**Recommendation: Residents should be clear how their contributions will be used to reach a decision.** It should be possible to trace a path from the final decision back to every contribution.

**Recommendation: The full decision making process, from initial consultation to final outcome should be clearly defined.** It should state who is eligible to contribute and how the contributions will affect the outcome. It should provide clear timescales for each stage in the process.

**Recommendation:** All issues must be assigned a **priority** that reflects both the **number** of people it affects and the **impact** that it has on those it affects.

### Skills/time/remuneration

Most management positions for residents are on a voluntary basis. Some believe that the fact that people are donating their time should afford them some leeway with the expectations that are placed upon them (for example, in the time taken to resolve issues):

*“avoid complaining as if we're owed something by neighbours generously donating their spare time” [forum entry]*

*“Given it’s all voluntary you can’t ask too much” [resident3]*

*I think there’s a very talented bunch of people who deal with things like the implementation of a new TV system and broadband and all that sort of thing, which you need a certain level of knowledge about it to be able to contribute” [Resident1]*

Yet on the other hand, we are aware of many frustrations that are a direct consequence of voluntary structures. Those that have not volunteered, unsurprisingly often suggest that time is the biggest issue:

*It's all very well for a house group member to say that anyone can join the committee and have a say.  But most of us lack the will or the time to be useful members of a committee that on occasion has to deal with complicated matters. [forum entry]*

*If someone doesn't have the time (or even the temperament or abilities) to volunteer to help out, it doesn't mean their criticisms aren't valid. [forum entry]*

*If people have unexpended energy and want to expend it on such a campaign, all well and good, and I will be the first to cheer when it succeeds. However, given what is currently on my plate, I cannot find time to do more than cheer from the sidelines on this. [forum entry]*

*It’s partly as well that I haven’t been able to fit in going [resident1]*

Technology provides an opportunity to increase the spatial and temporal opportunities for residents to participate, yet they also allow us to offer new forms of participation that might raise the quality of contribution and lead to improved decisions.

**Recommendations for dealing with time scarcity**

**Recommendation: Extend the scope and quality of participation through the use of multiple situated, online and mobile channels**

# APPENDIX A Barbican Interview Questions

How would you describe the Barbican community to someone who wasn’t familiar with it?

Could you draw the organization of the community? How does information flow between the different parties?

Can you tell me about how you became a part of the Barbican community? What drew you to it?

How long have you been a part of the Barbican community?

Can you tell me about any positive experiences you’ve had in the community?

Can you tell me about any challenging experiences you’ve had in the community?

Can you tell me about any community resources that you’ve been using?

Are there any ways that you wish you could use resources in the community that you currently can’t or don’t?

Are there programs or resources that are unique to the Barbican Estate?

How would you describe your participation in the Barbican community?

Can you tell us some of the most evident ways the Barbican community differs from other communities you are familiar with?

What are some of the ways the Barbican Estate has set out to differentiate itself from other estates?

Does the barbican have a relationship with any other nearby residential communities? Have they ever had to work together?

How are new residents/owners welcomed/supported?

Is there any information that is typically challenging to get across to new residents?

What is your view on the role of barbicantalk?

What criteria (if any) does he use to judge the ongoing success of the Barbican community? Has it improved/deteriorated over time?

Can you describe the demographics of the Barbican?

# APPENDIX B: Direct requests from residents

Direct requests from residents:

* How to encourage more people to go online?
* How to share the admin / monitoring?
* How to engage more people to take part in democracy and consultation? Voting on issues as there is limited attendance at Residents Association meetings
* How to ensure voting ability and access is limited to current households and not previous residents
* BUT I don’t want to have to read 1000s of comments and posts
* Also how to store information so that it is easily found, to avoid people posting questions that have already been discussed and for which information is already available
* How to do the online stuff but not exclude those who choose not to be online especially with a mixed community including an older or more deprived community
* How to avoid forcing sharing of online persona’s and guilting people into “friending” each other, eg not forcing people to join via their facebook page – these are mostly my neighbours or Housing officers – they are not the same group as my friends
* How to keep identities private – just because I post or have points of view shared with my neighbours I do not want that open for commercial companies, or identity thieves, or potential employers to harvest – keeping names anonymous from people who are not members but keeping the discussions open so relevant ones can be found and best practice shared
* How to connect to other resident or local communities to share best practice or connect with others who are doing things locally – but not get subject to commercial advertising
* How to engage people to participate rather than just view… they have to believe that their comments matter and make a difference
* More online polls could be used for resident consultation.

An effortless way for time starved volunteers to document, publish and engage the broader resident base would be theoretically helpful, but needs to take account of the fact that the barbican has many folks who aren't particularly tech savvy or internet enabled, and volunteers who aren't professional authors or able to carry a message in a succinct, digestible fashion.

1. http://upintheclouds.org/assets/doc/community\_clouds\_proposal.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.barbicanliving.co.uk/Barbican\_estate\_other/x6.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/environment-and-planning/planning/development-and-population-information/demography-and-housing/Documents/census-information-reports-census-residential-zones.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.burrellswharf.com [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.barbicanassociation.com [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.barbicanliving.co.uk/Barbican\_estate\_design/d13a.html [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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10. Moufle, Chantal. 2000b The Democratic Paradox. London: Verso [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parkinson%27s_law_of_triviality> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Carroll, John M., Mary Beth Rosson, and Jingying Zhou. "Collective efficacy as a measure of community." *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems*. ACM, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Taylor, Nick, et al. "Viewpoint: empowering communities with situated voting devices." *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)