



# Digital engagement, it's the new normal

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The COVID-19 pandemic has inspired great creativity by community engagement practitioners. It has been the research and development phase that our sector needed to jettison into the digital age. In this article, I 'zoom in' with the 2021 PIA community engagement award nominees to learn about their digital online engagement experiences.

## Digital Engagement and Public Policy

In the area of public policy formulation, the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE) took on two major projects during the COVID-19 pandemic involving the review and rationalisation of key legislation. Both involved the DPIE stepping away from their travelling 'roadshow' engagement model.

### Award Nominee 1, the DPIE for the Employment Zones Reform

The DPIE undertook a review of employment zones as recommended by the NSW Productivity Commission. The project engagement was undertaken in conjunction with Cred Consulting. "We could never have achieved the outcome that we did if we had used our usual roadshows," said Aoife Wynter, DPIE Director of Employment Zones Reform. "This project has reinforced that when substantial in-depth consultation on a state-wide stage is required, it is digital all the way," she said. In just five weeks the team was able to implement a three-stage methodology that involved:

1. An online survey of all NSW councils to understand their on-the-ground experiences;
2. An extensive series of Zoom workshops with regional groupings of council planners and economic development officers to build understanding on how the zones are used on the ground, what is working and what is not Refer Figure 1; and
3. Stakeholder interviews to understand the needs of industry and to hear about the future of work.

"This was a genuine attempt to consult with planners who implement this legislation every day," said April McCabe of Cred Consulting. "It was critical we secured their support and feedback. Because we were using digital engagement, council planners were much more relaxed and focused on the discussion at hand. The Zoom meeting format was convenient, as planners did not have to travel to get to a meeting location. They were also able to readily share their experiences on Zoom. The whole process was a lot more agile," she said.

### Award Nominee 2, WSP for the DPIE Complying Development Reform - Building Business Back Better

Similar positive experiences were shared by Jacqui Salter and Brendan Blakely from the WSP Planning and Places Team who undertook the engagement for the reform of complying development legislation. This project involved consulting with council planners, accredited certifiers and peak and industry groups. The project required feedback across 45 topics, spanned wide-ranging changes, all requiring robust examination.

"Digital was our friend on this project. Round one involved a webinar to launch the project and the approach to be followed. This webinar reached 230 participants across the state. It was recorded and the video and audio provided to participants to share with their teams. We would not have been able to reach this state-wide audience in one meeting using face-to-face engagement," said Brendan Blakely.

"The webinar unearthed a range of issues that had not been thought of and this enabled the DPIE to continue conversations with participants about these matters," Jacqui Salter added. In the second round of discussions, 23 webinars were used to focus the conversation around key themes and enabling stakeholders across NSW to participate in multiple group discussions. Audiences were able to have genuine conversations with DPIE policymakers. Having policymakers front and centre in each discussion built rapport, removed bureaucratic barriers and promoted shared understanding.

### Digital Engagement & Placemaking

In placemaking, the benefits of traditional engagement techniques such as design workshops, community walks, intercept surveys, and pop-up events are widely known. The next two award nominees applied their creativity to make these techniques contactless. Both now share the view that, whatever you can do physically, you can adapt and do digitally with great success.

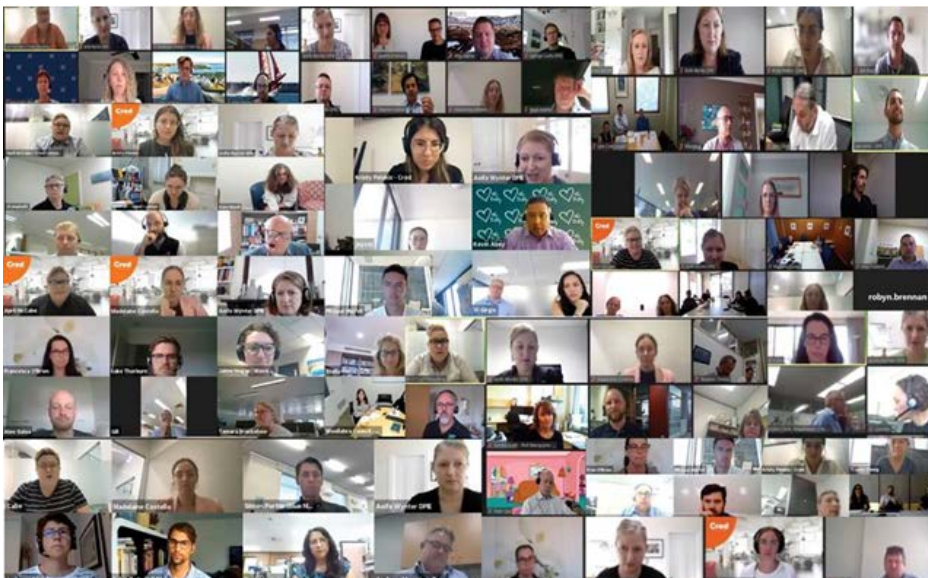


Figure 1: Employment zones reform zoom meeting source: NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, October 2021

### Award Nominee 3, Cred Consulting for the Oxford Street Strategic Planning Review

Jen Guice of Cred Consulting implemented a contactless engagement process on behalf of the City of Sydney Council with residents, businesses, landowners and targeted groups including the LGBTQI community, to inform the strategic review of planning controls for Oxford Street. While the engagement was conducted online, Jen wanted to develop activities that helped participants share their emotional connection, qualitative insights and their ideas for the future of Oxford Street. My favourite initiatives with this program are:

- A digital love letter to Oxford Street using a specially designed digital postcard;
- A 12-stop digital guided walking tour that led participants to key areas of local interest. Refer Figure 2; and
- Brightly coloured QR-coded footpath decals that informed the community about the project and online activities. Refer Figure 3.

When asked about the age of participants, Jen commented that Cred had been "pleased to see increased participation from young people in their early to mid-20s". Asked whether digital engagement is exclusionary, she shared that they set up a phone number for the project just in case someone couldn't go online. She wasn't surprised that no phone messages were received. In her opinion, digital engagement has actually improved accessibility. "Lots of people don't want to go out to night events. We held our online events around 5pm. We found this time worked well, it was before the dinner rush, people had finished work and they enjoyed the chance to interact and talk about something different," she said.



Figure 3 Oxford Street footpath decals (Source: Cred Consulting, October 2021)

### Award Nominee 4, Place Score for the Nowra CBD Revitalisation Project

The Nowra CBD Revitalisation Project was a three-stage collaborative placemaking project undertaken on behalf of Shoalhaven Council. The project was led by Valli Morphet of Place Score and involved residents and businesses coming together to:

1. Understand the community's vision and aspirations for their local centre;
2. Appraise how the centre was performing; and
3. Formulate an action plan to improve performance achieving a better fit with the overriding vision.

As place makers, Place Score seek to understand human behaviour and COVID-19 has changed how we behave and how we approach and act in spaces and places.

"We wanted to keep our research in the field and we recognised that people were still out and about walking. We took our fieldwork methodology online using QR codes to capture survey responses at key locations," Valli shared.

A series of Zoom workshops were held at various times of the day. Valli Morphet highlighted the success of a regular 7.30am online event for local businesses so that they could be involved before they started work. I love that this project identified and secured \$1 million in funding to upgrade the civic space called Junction Court. The project was selected by the community and they developed the brief for its revitalisation. The improvements will help to attract locals back into the CBD post pandemic.

### Is digital engagement set to become the new normal?

At its purest level, engagement is the art of having a conversation. Conversations can occur effectively online, and the accessibility benefits afforded by digital platforms mean that they provide the foundation to support robust and intelligent ongoing dialogue.

Based on their collective experience, all nominees agreed they did not see a return to face-to-face engagement for projects that require state-wide consultation across multiple stakeholders. The efficiency, quality and cost-effectiveness of the process is so enhanced by digital engagement, it is set to become the new normal in this space.

For placemaking projects we will see increased reliance on hybrid engagement programs going forward. We need to recognise that face-to-face engagement is not for everyone. Hybrid programs will increase the reach of engagement, appealing to those people who may want to engage with a different voice online. ■

### Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Aoife Wynter, April McCabe, Jacqui Salter, Brendan Blakely and Valli Morphet for taking the time to speak with me about their award nominations. At the time of writing, the award winners had not been announced. You are all very deserving recipients.

**Belinda Barnett BTP (Hons) Cert Mkg (UTS) MPIA** is Managing Director of Urban Concepts and the newly launched UrbanTalk. With over three decades of planning experience, Belinda is passionate about digital communication and the opportunities it affords the development sector.



Figure 2: Figure 2 The Oxford Street walking tour brochure. (Source: Cred Consulting, October 2021)