An easy guide to
community engagement

Community First
Yorkshire

Contents

Introduction

This guide is aimed at the smaller community groups including parish councils, parish meetings, local community groups and organisations who want to consult with their residents or members in order to gather information, gauge opinions and sound out ideas through encouraging everyone to engage and contribute.

The following pages outline why community engagement is important, and highlight some of the pitfalls. You'll find an overview of a range of techniques to help you apply the most appropriate methods to your engagement activities, along with useful tips and details of organisations and resources that provide further support.

Look out for this symbol

Supplementary to this booklet are templates, examples and other useful tools to help your community engagement project run smoothly. Throughout the booklet you will see the symbol which highlights that there is further information available in digital format (e.g. PDFs) in the online Community Engagement Toolkit. You can find the toolkit at **www.communityfirstyorkshire.org.uk**, together with a PDF version of this booklet.

What's the value of community engagement?

Community engagement is key for any group or community who want to develop new projects, make changes in their community, or gather information, for example to provide evidence of need. Groups and communities can have a geographical base, such as a parish, town or village, or can be a collective of people who have shared interests or beliefs, such as sports, hobbies or opinions. Community engagement enables groups and communities to come together to consult on a specific issue or theme. Examples include a local youth project, allotments, activities for older residents and campaigns about issues of concern to local people.

Most community projects require some kind of funding, usually requiring some kind of application process. There is often strong competition for funding for community projects and so it's important to make sure your application is as good as it can be.

You will find funding applications far easier to complete if you involve the community whose lives will be affected by your project by conducting meaningful community engagement. This engagement can help provide evidence of need to support your funding application. In addition, it can help to identify the benefits of your project and enable members of the community to have an input in to the application. Input from the community is especially valuable as it may highlight opportunities, ideas or skills that could significantly improve the project.

Community engagement can be a daunting task, particularly for groups based in rural areas where geography can make it difficult to reach out to people if, for example, they don't have access to transport or internet connectivity. However, with some simple tips, good examples and information on where to go for help, advice and support, the engagement process can be manageable, beneficial and enjoyable.

This simple guide contains tips and advice on where to start, where to go for help and support and looks at different and varied techniques that might work in your community. If you need any support with your community engagement project, including parish plans, then please contact Community First Yorkshire by email **info@communityfirstyorkshire.org.uk** or telephone 01904 704177.

Things to consider before you start engaging with your community

It is important from the start that you have a clear idea of why you need to engage, what you are trying to achieve and whether it is realistic, manageable and achievable.

You will need a plan to include what you intend to do and when, who will be involved and what their responsibilities will be. The plan will need a timescale and costings such as venue hire, refreshments, resources etc. and you should regularly review and update it, together with the other people involved in the project.

💬 **You can find templates to produce your own plan in the toolkit.**

You should also consider the following questions:

- *Do you have the skills and capacity within your group to do this or do you need any additional assistance or training?*
  Read, research and understand what you need to do before you embark on the practical aspect of your project. Talk to others in the group and conduct a skills analysis to establish where people's strengths lie and where you may need to involve others or undertake training.

  💬 **See the toolkit for organisations that may be able to provide support.**

- *Does anyone else need to be involved in the project?*
  As well as people with additional skills, this might include volunteers and individuals from outside of your community/group, such as local stakeholders (landowners and local businesses, for example), local authorities and parish councils.

- *Does your group have any terms of reference or a constitution?*
  This might seem unnecessary, especially if members of your group are all friends, but it is really important to set some ground rules if your group is going to operate effectively and if your project is going to run to plan.

  💬 **You can find templates and guidance in the toolkit.**

- *Will you be engaging with the whole community to capture a wide range of information, such as a parish plan, or is it targeted at a specific interest group, for example a village hall, youth service, play/recreation facilities?*

- *What type of engagement methods you are going to use? Which will be the most appropriate?*
  You can find examples of techniques you can use on pages 7-11.

- *Will the engagement involve any activities that could present a health and safety or other risk to those involved?*
  For example, if you are running an event you should assess the intended venue to ensure it is safe and free of any trip hazards, has appropriate emergency access and fire safety measures in place, etc. In many cases a risk assessment will be necessary.

  You can find guidance about carrying out a risk assessment in the toolkit.

- *What type of information, and at what level, are you wanting to gather?*
  This could be statistics, preferences, opinions, issues and concerns.

- *How will you collate and store this information?*
  You need to consider the sensitivity of any information you are gathering and ensure that you comply with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). This will mean storing people's details securely and not retaining information for longer than you need to.

  For more information about GDPR, see the guidance sheet in the toolkit.

- *Are there any barriers to carrying out community engagement? If so, what are they?*
  You might want to think about how you involve the 'hard to reach' remote/dispersed communities, availability of people involved (including volunteers), transport to events, technical barriers, apathy, accessibility of venues and budget constraints.

- *Can you be flexible?*
  You might have a very clear idea about what you think is needed, but others in your community may take a different view. Try not to be too rigid in your approach and be prepared to adapt your original plan if the community consultation reveals something different is required.

- *How and when will you feedback to the respondents?*
  It's important that you update everyone involved on the progress of your project, otherwise people may disengage.

Examples of consultation techniques

Below are a range of methods for engaging with your community and gathering feedback from local residents.

Questionnaires and surveys – These can be really useful if you want to gather statistical data, views and opinions, or information from people who may not want (or be able) to join face-to-face meetings. Questionnaires and surveys can be hand delivered, sent by post or shared online and it's a good idea to include a mix of open and closed questions. Do bear in mind that it's unlikely everyone who receives a questionnaire will complete it, and that you will need to allow time to analyse the results.

ℹ **More details about the pros and cons of this approach can be found in the toolkit, together with some useful guides on creating questionnaires.**

Face-to-face interviews – Talking to people face-to-face enables you to put people at ease and respond to any concerns or questions they have. It also means you can read body language, and having a more conversational situation may lead you to pose further questions that you might not have otherwise asked. Face-to-face interviews can be especially useful with older people and those who have sensory impairments, or who may not have access to transport or technology restricting their ability to engage in other ways, but they can be very time consuming.

Flyers and newsletters – An effective way of getting information to all households, provided they are well written, interesting and well designed. (If a newsletter already exists in your area, you can ask to include a story rather than create your own newsletter.) There are templates for flyers online, or you might be able to find someone in your community who is suitably skilled to do the design work for you. Flyers should be bold in colour and include an image to grab attention. Try not to be too text heavy but make sure you include all the crucial details including time, date and place.

ℹ **Go to the toolkit to find some useful tips on producing marketing materials.**

Involve young people – Invite schools and youth clubs to get involved with your project by either doing an activity or writing a questionnaire for each other. Encourage them to have a debate about how the project will affect them or perhaps create some artwork. Pictured here, pupils from Slingsby Community Primary School produced a mosaic of individual ceramic tiles together with members of the community and Rural Arts to produce a piece of impressive art work that was displayed outdoors.

Social media – Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are a quick, cheap and effective way of getting information to a large audience, especially younger people and people who may not be able to get out of the house. Simple polls can be undertaken on Twitter or in Facebook groups, or by asking questions on Facebook. Make sure you use the most appropriate platform for your audience.

See toolkit for hints and tips on getting the most from social media.

Suggestion boxes – These can be used to gather ideas outside of meetings and events. They can be placed in different locations within a community, such as the school, local shop, village hall etc.

Quizzes and competitions – These are not only fun but can be interesting and encourage people to mix with others and get involved. Prizes could be donated from local businesses.

Community fairs – A great way to kick-start a consultation process, such as a community or parish plan, community fairs can encourage people to get involved and highlight the aspirations, opportunities and issues within the community. Community events are most effective when a number of organisations and groups work together. Agencies such as local councils, emergency services and health groups could attend to talk to local people, perhaps having a stand at the event. Community fairs will require planning and resources, and there will be costs for things like venue hire, refreshments, plus the production cost of posters and flyers to advertise the event. As well as organising the event, you will need volunteers to be available on the day to welcome attendees and answer any questions. Careful consideration should be given to the timing of the event, accessibility to the venue, transport and childcare requirements. Alternatively, you could 'piggyback' onto existing local events such as agricultural and village shows, fetes and markets, if you have information you can display on boards that can be easily transported and handouts such as flyers that can be given out. People will already be there, and you can have conversations and explain what you are doing. You may be asked for a donation.

See the toolkit for some useful tips and guidance on setting up a community event.

Local walk about – This is especially useful if you're working on a project concerning the visual aspect of the community, such as a village design statement. Organise a tour of the locality to collectively consider features of the area. This is a great way to encourage dialogue and newer residents can learn more about the history of the place in which they live.

Parish plan – A parish plan is an effective way of consulting with a village or small town. It is intended to take a holistic view of village life and can cover everything that is relevant to the area. Ideally they involve all the residents, (all age groups) community groups, businesses and stakeholders. The main part of a parish plan is the action plan which identifies the key findings of the consultation, the concerns, issues and opportunities and sets out actions to address them, who is responsible for their implementation and a timescale.

Parish map – Create a map of your local area to show the assets and include ideas to improve the built and natural environment. Your map can include photos, art and craft work, so it's often a good technique to use with schools and young people or local craft groups. When completed the map can be displayed in community buildings.

Planning for Real® – This model of consultation, developed by the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation, is carried out by using a 3D model of the area based on a large-scale map. Flags are placed on the boards to highlight issues, suggestions for

improvements and other comments. Schools can help to make the model and it can be transported and used at different venues. For more information see **www.planningforreal.org.uk**

Place standard: How good is our place? – A web-based tool, created by the Scottish Government, that can be used at a public event. It has fourteen topics that can be rated on a scale of importance by residents. This is more aimed at towns or larger villages and is usually organised by the local authority. For more information see **www.placestandard.scot**

There are smaller activities and techniques that can be used, for example as part of a parish plan or community event, which will help to engage the broadest possible audience. Some examples are below:


Maps/diagrams and flags – Affix a large map or diagram to insulation board or similar material that cocktail sticks can be put onto and small pieces of coloured card (flags) can be written on or pre-printed. People can then place these where appropriate on the map/diagram. This is a helpful technique to use when discussing issues relating to physical locations.

Historical photographs – Display an old photograph of a building or scene in the community alongside a recent photo taken from the same place. This can stimulate memories and discussion, and is also a means of highlighting what people like or don't like about their area. If there is a local history society they should be able to help with providing old photographs.

Sticky notes on large boards – Put topic headings or specific questions on the boards and ask people to write their comments or suggestions on sticky notes which they can then apply to the relevant heading/question. This is easy to do and encourages conversations.

Washing line and fishing for ideas – These are a fun, colourful way to engage. Make fish or articles of clothing out of cardboard. People can write comments on the cardboard pieces and they can be pegged on the washing line or placed in a 'dry' pond. Children love to help make the clothing/fish.
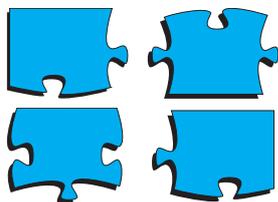
Jigsaws – A photograph of a local scene, building or a map could be enlarged to A2 or larger and cut into pieces which are jumbled up. Invite people to complete the jigsaw; perhaps time them and award a prize for the fastest. This is fun and helps to break the ice and stimulate conversations.

'Parting comments' footsteps – Use cardboard cut-outs of a foot. These can be used for people to record their thoughts as they leave an event.

The above list is not definitive – there are lots of innovative ways you can engage with your community, either in person or remotely. Do consider things like health and safety if you are running an 'in person' activity which involves the general public and be sure to complete a risk assessment if necessary.

🛈 **See the toolkit for further information about risk assessments.**

When deciding on which types of consultation techniques to use think about the audience, the type of information you are wanting to get, the seriousness of the topics. It is recommended that you use a variety of techniques, the more fun ones at the start when you are looking to engage as many as possible and then use the questionnaire/survey towards the end when you have identified the key topics/issues etc. around which the questions need to be targeted, with additional space for anything not covered.

Things to remember

- Stick to your timescales whenever possible.

- Advertise what you are trying to achieve, talk to as many people as you can in your community and encourage them to get involved.

- Work as a team, allocate tasks and responsibilities. Make decisions together. Use skills and knowledge available in the community.

- Be transparent, don't have hidden agendas.

- Make sure people know who to contact if they have any questions.

- Be inclusive: try to include those who may have different views or opinions – allow everyone to have their say.

- Keep people informed of progress, or lack of it, and explain the reason for any delays (otherwise they might disengage with your project). Use local networks such as websites, social media, and newsletters to send out information.

  See guidance on social media in the toolkit.

- Avoid duplication. Have other forms of engagement been done in the past? What information already exists? Which techniques worked best with your community?

- Be aware that not everyone will find it easy to engage for lots of reasons, including limited time. Don't be afraid to try new and different approaches that will appeal to different age groups, abilities and backgrounds. If you can make them fun, then even better!

- Offer an incentive if you think it will help people engage in the consultation, such as a prize draw with the winner receiving a voucher for a local business.

- Make sure you consider everyone in your community and don't forget to involve people who may be harder to reach, including young people (through local schools and youth clubs), older people, those who are new to your community and people who may not have English as a first language.

- If you have the time, collect completed surveys in person – door-to-door collection usually gives the best return. It's an opportunity to get to know people in the community better, and people will invariably share additional thoughts so have a notebook and pen handy to capture these.

- Follow the terms of reference/constitution for your group at all times.

  You can find more information in the toolkit.