

Test: How to choose the right level of engagement

Engagement is a complicated process. To make it successful you need to consider its inputs and outputs, and the form that it takes. This test suggests steps for approaching engagement exercises. A tool can't tell you all the answers, but it can tell you some of the questions to address.¹

1. what is the objective of the engagement?
2. who are the stakeholders and what are their needs?
3. what stage of the engagement process are we at?
4. what resources and limitations apply?

Only then can you answer the final, key question – 'What methods should I choose?'

What's the objective of the engagement?

For engagement to be successful both the council and residents need to know exactly what it is for. The objectives in the table below build on the different levels of engagement outlined in Foundation II.

Information giving	There is little scope to comment or influence the decisions that are being made. We do need to explain what is happening and be transparent
Consultation	There is little scope to influence the decisions that are being made but there is room to work with residents on what happens next.
Co-production	There is some scope to influence the decision that will be taken and we are open to alternatives.
Citizen power	There is a lot of room to shape the decision/service and what it is that we are deciding on. It is important that we have well-informed and involved sections of the community to help with this.
Citizen power	The decision or service is up for grabs and there's potential to work in partnership with local people. We are offering long-term involvement.

¹ 'Community Planning Toolkit', Big Lottery Fund, Community Places and National Lottery, 2014

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Who are the stakeholders and what are their needs?

The next stage is to think about stakeholder needs. The table below looks at what these are and how they input on the design of your consultation or engagement process.

Potential Barriers	Design Issues to consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. the capacity and ability of different stakeholders to participate ii. 'hard to reach groups' such as young people or older people, minority groups or socially excluded groups iii. levels of community infrastructure iv. contested or divided communities v. rural isolation vi. gaps in information vii. literacy and numeracy levels and dominance of oral culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. techniques and engagement methods to be used ii. need for independent facilitation iii. location and accessibility of the venue iv. the number and type of engagement events v. transport requirements vi. childcare needs vii. format and content of communication and publicity materials viii. use of interpreters and signers ix. need for outreach activities

Here is an example of how you might overcome a lack of engagement with time-poor parents.²

“Time-poor parents are a good example of a specific set of needs. Parents of young children can be difficult to engage particularly if they are working. Setting up standalone events to engage parents is likely to be both difficult and unsuccessful. Parents can however be reached via their children; marketing companies have known for years that children are a way of accessing the decision-making parents. Schools based projects are a positive way of gaining legitimacy and influence particularly if the children are encouraged to involve the family as part of the project through ‘family learning’. Examples where this may be appropriate, healthy weights, physical activity, community visioning exercises, voter registration, and community planning amongst others. This type of approach has collateral benefits of building parental engagement with schools.”

² ‘How to involve hard to reach parents’, National College for School Leadership, Clare Campbell, 2011

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What stage of the decision-making process are we at?

Below is a table for the different channels and methods you should use depending on how far advanced you are in the process. The idea, of course, is that once you're past the initial stage of just beginning to talk, the rest should follow fairly naturally, as you become more familiar with stakeholders.

Where are you?	Communication	Engagement methods	Information
Just beginning to talk	Exploratory style focused on gauging awareness	Focus groups and research surveys	Introducing initial thoughts
It's out there and people are talking	Setting the agenda and communication of clear direction	Feedback sessions, deliberative events and co-production	Explanatory, making a case for the direction
Plans are receiving feedback and we're working on it	Formal communication that invites feedback	More formal planning and impact sessions	Detailed plans and the impacts, roles and responsibilities
Decisions have been made and we're dealing with the consequences	Directional communication, front-line teams and others delivering messages	Face-to-face with front-line teams and individual correspondence; high level support for transition	Guidance on what happens following decisions

What resources do you have and what limitations apply?

We can all design the perfect engagement process given a blank sheet of paper, but in reality the paper is rarely blank. Restricted budgets and legal requirements about timelines mean that your goal is effective and efficient engagement rather than perfect engagement. To achieve that you need to identify and prioritise the resources at your disposal. These might include:³

- input by staff, volunteers and other interested stakeholders
- background information or briefing papers on the issues or plan proposals

³ See [The community planning toolkit](#)

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- independent facilitation
- communication and promotion, venue hire, transport, childcare, translation
- printing and circulating a report for provision of feedback
- resourcing local community and voluntary groups to (where necessary) support people in understanding and responding to information and proposals.

You need to have a budget that matches the scale and scope of the process. You will have defined that when you set out your objectives and likely stakeholders. If there is a mismatch, then either ambition or budget must give way. Before dropping anything from your engagement plan, make sure you consider the statutory requirements.

What methods should I choose?

The below, again taken from the [community planning toolkit](#), is a list of the different types of engagement type you might consider.

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|------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| • art and creativity | • deliberative events | • consensus building |
| • community mapping | • web based consultation | • citizens' panel |
| • planning for real © | • future search | • street stalls |
| • public meetings | • open space technology | • questionnaires |
| • focus groups and workshops | • citizens' juries | • local community meetings |

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