

Tool: Key questions for successful charrettes

Charrette

noun

1. a public meeting or workshop devoted to a concerted effort to solve a problem or plan the design of something.
2. a period of intense work, typically undertaken in order to meet a deadline.

Origin: “Late Middle English (denoting a cart or wagon): from French charrette, literally ‘cart’; current sense dates from the mid-20th century, possibly with reference to the use of a cart in 19th-century Paris to collect architecture students’ work on the day of an exhibition.”

Modern engagement usage: “A charrette is an intensive planning session where citizens, designers and others collaborate on a vision for development. It provides a forum for ideas and offers the unique advantage of giving immediate feedback to the designers. More importantly, it allows everyone who participates to be a mutual author of the plan.”¹

Charrettes can be a powerful tool in the planning process. Executed well, they harness the best of local knowledge, helping to deliver plans which not only have the support of the community, but which are the best fit for their locality.

A charrette works by bringing local stakeholders together with a design team to work up a complete plan over several days. Once stakeholders have brainstormed everything they would like to see from a site, the design team goes away and puts together plans which are then brought back to the stakeholders for further comment, followed by more revision until a final plan is arrived at.

Central to delivering a successful charrette is allocating sufficient resources to the engagement and undertaking careful preparation. In the case of larger charrettes, it can mean several months of planning.

¹ See Oxford English Dictionary definition. Modern usage definition taken from [The Town Paper](#).

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Here are a few of the major things you should consider in delivering a successful charrette.

- 1) **Be clear on your goals.** Going into the process it's important to know what you want to come out of it in order to determine if a charrette is really the best tool for the job, to design a programme which will secure the desired outcome and to ensure the desired goals have been met at the end of the process.
 - Is the project likely to attract the large level of public interest required?
 - Can the process be adequately resourced in terms of time, personnel and money?
 - Will whatever the stakeholders come up with be acceptable, even where it deviates from institutional expectations?
- 2) **Invite the right people.** For a charrette to work you need both a representative sample of stakeholders in attendance and a project team capable of putting together a complete design over several days.
 - What size of audience is appropriate to ensure all stakeholder groups are adequately represented?
 - How do you intend to recruit people and ensure that they attend over the length of the charrette?
 - Will the team attending have all the skills necessary to put together a deliverable scheme and facilitate an event?
- 3) **Do the preparation.** Preparation is crucial to any successful charrette. Fail to have the right people, the right resources to hand and the right structure for the event, and the outcomes are unlikely to be satisfactory for anyone.
 - Can you find a venue which will accommodate the process over its running time and somewhere close enough to the site to add to the immersive nature of the process?
 - What materials are needed to get the most out of the stakeholder input and to enable the design team to produce a complete plan over the course of the charrette?
 - Does the agenda ensure that there is enough time and structure for the process to produce a deliverable design, without losing the constrained timescale and creative freedom which are the hallmarks of the charrette process?

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- 4) **Make the most of the process.** Once the charrette is up and running, it is still possible for things to go wrong. Active facilitation, observing what is taking place and working to address problems where they emerge, can ensure a charette stays on track.
- Is everyone working collaboratively?
 - Are people focusing too much on the 'big picture' and ignoring the details?
 - Would the plans be deliverable?
- 5) **Evaluation is important too.** Undertaking evaluation upon completion of the project will help you to determine whether the process has achieved its desired goals and enable an ongoing relationship with participants.
- How do you intend to report back to participants on how their contributions have been used?
 - Do you want to continue to consult with participants around the project on an ongoing basis and how do you plan to do so?
 - Has the process delivered on your goals?

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