

# WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

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The full HCA toolkit can be found at [www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/community-engagement-toolkit](http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/community-engagement-toolkit)

## What is community engagement?

Community engagement means different things to different people and many people use the phrase to describe very different approaches. The term is used, often interchangeably, with others such as 'involvement' and 'participation', and to describe a range of activities.

For the purposes of this toolkit, community engagement is simply defined as involving the people that live in your area with local redevelopment. This is simple to say but difficult to do: success will be achieved through a range of approaches and activities, and on a sliding scale of involvement that ranges from giving people information and asking them for their views, to giving communities a direct say in decisions and in some cases control over future development.

## Understanding community engagement theory

There is a wide ranging body of work exploring the theory of good community engagement, which draws on research and practical experience from around the world. Here we introduce some of the best known and most useful concepts for planning community engagement.

There are two factors which you will need to consider when developing your approach to community engagement: how deep and how broad an approach you intend to pursue.

The choices you make in relation to these two factors will be determined by what it is you are trying to do and will help you to determine the approach and activities that you use. Understanding the range of possible perspectives will be crucial as this will help you shape what can be achieved and how you communicate with local people.

**The International Association for Public Participation's 5 step framework for participation** is a useful framework for thinking about different objectives and approaches for community engagement. Another approach, which does not put the different options in as hierarchy is the 'wheel of participation'.

Other useful links for information about the theory of community engagement include:

[CAG Consultants' work on communities and participation](#)

[JRF: Community participation and empowerment: putting theory into practice](#)

[Partnerships online: from theory to practice](#)

**[International Association for Public Participation's](#) 5 step framework for participation**

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has developed a framework for looking at the depth and scope of engagement. This is based on five levels of engagement, each one increasing levels of participation and involvement. At one end of the spectrum engagement is simply an information sharing exercise, for example through the provision of websites or newsletters. At the other end, engagement can lead to genuine community empowerment and local control through mechanisms such as [Community Development Trusts](#).

Goal	Techniques		
<b>Inform</b>	Provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the opportunities, problems, alternatives and/or solutions	Keeping the public informed through information dissemination. One –way process that is starting point of dialogue.	Effective information dissemination is vital, with honesty about non-negotiable areas of influence. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newsletters</li> <li>• Websites</li> <li>• exhibitions</li> </ul>
<b>Consult</b>	Obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions	Consultation is a term recognised in law: must invite responses and consider them before making decision, although under no obligation to make changes.	It is a structured episode, not a process: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus groups</li> <li>• Surveys</li> <li>• Public meetings</li> </ul>
<b>Involve</b>	Work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	Joint consideration of public responses with the community before decisions are taken, with feedback on how community has influenced decisions	Fluid, ongoing process and face to face dialogue: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshops</li> <li>• Deliberative Polling</li> </ul>
<b>Collaborate</b>	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	Look to the community for help in formulating solutions, incorporating recommendations into the decisions as far as is possible	Face to face dialogue with community representatives and those effected. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participatory decision-making</li> </ul>
<b>Empower</b>	Place final decision-making in the hands of the public	Requires investment in time and resources and community capacity building	Supporting community control through the existence of highly developed local structures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Development Trusts</li> </ul>

*The 'wheel of participation'*

This framework has been used by different agencies wishing to present options for involvement and participation. The [original thinking](#) outlining this approach was published in 1998.

Here is [one illustration](#) of a wheel.



Read about two examples where this has been used in practice: in Scotland, by [South Lanarkshire Council](#) and by [Medina Housing Association](#) on the Isle of Wight.

## Why do people participate?

[Understanding Participation](#), a literature review by the participation organisation Involve, demonstrates that people's reasons for being 'active' citizens will vary greatly depending on their social, environmental and personal circumstances. The main reasons outlined for people getting involved are:

- "A personal interest" or common interests
- An aspiration to change things
- Faith
- Exposure and access to community and voluntary sectors
- An opportunity to voice opinions

Recent literature suggests that having a voice in the community and feeling a sense of empowerment gives citizens a stronger commitment to their local area. As a consequence they will be more likely to be a part of local activities. In addition, according to Understanding Participation, "when an active interest is shown in their opinion...and feel their engagement was influential and acted upon" a citizen will be more motivated to be involved and stay involved politically.

Social networks are also an important factor in triggering the involvement of citizens. Some triggers include 'being asked', 'word of mouth' and the influence of community 'motivators'.

## What does good engagement look like?

Find out about what good engagement looks like by:

Joining Local Government Improvement and Development's [Community of Practice](#) on community engagement

Reading lessons from CLG's [Guide Neighbourhoods](#) programme about working with and empowering neighbourhoods and [Local Government Improvement and Development's](#) advice about community engagement

Reading [Planning Aid's guide to good public engagement in development](#)

Reading about [Camp Hill](#), Nuneaton, Warwickshire - a holistic approach to community engagement

Each community is unique and each challenge you face will be different; 'one size fits all' does not apply when it comes to community engagement.

When done well community engagement can bring a wide range of benefits to those involved in a particular project or plan, including to local people. It can increase trust in and improve the reputation of councils, and deliver improvements to services.

While it is wise to follow best practice methods and draw upon the best possible experience, it is also important to be flexible and adopt an approach which takes into account local difference. In some cases using tried and tested methods that have worked in one area may not fit your local circumstances. So, there is no set template for community engagement projects. Rather there is a menu of options from which you can choose throughout, always referring back to what it is you are trying to achieve and adapting to local circumstances as things change on the ground.

*Good planning is critical to successful community engagement*

The participation organisation, [Involve](#) recommends a formula for public participation. Below is a summary of the key factors it believes should be considered when planning activity:

- **purpose** - be clear about what the engagement activity seeks to achieve;
- **context** - pay attention to the needs and character of the local community;
- **people** - consider who should be involved, what their needs are, and what support or incentives may help them take part;
- **method** - design the process and choose a method that is appropriate to the purpose, context and people; and
- **outcome** – set the goals and overall objectives.

Good engagement will reach all sections of the community, not just the people who are already involved in local organisations or decision-making. Research has shown that typical participants in local decisions vary according to the activity and the issue, but some groups can be harder to engage than others – often because they do not want (or do not have the time) to attend community meetings.

[Research](#) shows:

- there is often a perceived 'usual suspect' group that dominates local participation;
- the typical participant is older (24 per cent of 50-74 year olds compared to 12 per cent of 16-24 year olds have participated in consultation exercises);
- black and minority ethnic groups tend to be under-represented;
- those living in rural areas were identified as more likely to engage, with 27 per cent taking part compared to 19 per cent living in urban areas.

### *Use creative approaches to community engagement*

There are many creative approaches to community engagement that have been developed in response to the challenge of involving young people, families and minority groups in local decision-making.

Read about Participatory Appraisal approaches, the Community Game project developed by [Living Streets](#) and work by the Chartered Institute of Housing about [engaging Muslim communities](#).

You will need to balance the experience and knowledge of people in your team, with tried and tested practice and the need to take a variety of approaches to engage different groups of people. Make sure you know about previous attempts to engage local people by making use of existing information, and use the best and most appropriate tools available for the task in hand, for example:

- traditional approaches to community engagement can be combined with using new technology. This may include geographical information systems (GIS) based software for mailing lists, texting and computer simulations and models
- internet-based approaches such as blogs and twitter can provide ways in which people with ICT access and skills to engage and interact with each other
- keep an eye on changes as they develop as new tools that can be useful when developing groups on-line – like Facebook, [tumblr](#) or [ning](#)
- technology can also serve to exclude, putting up new barriers to some people getting involved.

The combination of tools you use will need to be determined by who it is you need to engage and what you know about them.

#### **Top tip: Community leadership in engagement activity**

In some situations where residents and community groups are very active or supportive of local development and regeneration, it might be appropriate to let them take the lead on engagement activities.

There are many good examples of situations where residents and community groups have been trained to carry out local research or participatory planning exercises.

Participatory Appraisal is one approach that allows residents to define their own priorities for action. It is a technique that is widely used around the world and has been successfully adopted by some local authorities in the UK.

Find out about [Participatory Appraisal](#) as an approach and click here to find out how [South Tyneside Council](#) used this approach for neighbourhood planning.

**Case Study: Camp Hill, Nuneaton, Warwickshire.  
A holistic approach to community engagement**

Camp Hill was a single tenure former colliery community built in the 1950s and 60s that had become increasingly isolated from neighbouring areas. Amongst the 10 per cent most deprived wards in the UK, Camp Hill faced a range of socio-economic problems and suffered from being stigmatised as a 'sink estate'. The estate has been turned around through a comprehensive approach to regeneration that placed community engagement at the heart of the programme. The resulting community regeneration initiative – Pride in Camp Hill - is now winning plaudits for its work; coming first in the Best Housing, Construction and Infrastructure Category in the Community Partnership Awards 2010.

Camp Hill's challenges included a high rate of buy-to-let properties and absentee landlords, low educational attainment, poor health and youth under-achievement. It was a key local priority and the community is now heavily involved in all phases of the housing and regeneration Masterplan.

In the first phase of the project the local authority raised the profile of the local issues with the HCA and key agencies. This led to an agreement amongst key partners to prioritise comprehensive regeneration of the estate including improving social outcomes and changes to housing. The Pride in Camp Hill (PINCH) team was created with the active involvement of elected members, local community groups and residents. Resident members had two places on the PINCH board, and through their involvement functioned as advocates of the project to the community.

**Contact Chris Egan, Programme Manager [chris.egan@prideincamphill.co.uk](mailto:chris.egan@prideincamphill.co.uk)**

## Engaging communities on difficult issues

Community engagement can be productive and fulfilling work but it can also be complex, difficult, challenging and frustrating for everyone involved. It is an ongoing process of dialogue and influence in response to local priorities.

The process of community engagement inevitably unearths different and often opposing views, some of which cannot be reconciled. This is especially so when projects are controversial or raise strong objections from local communities, for example, when a hostel for people coming out of prison is proposed as part of a new community, or where the proportion of social housing in a development is felt by existing residents to be too great, or when transport infrastructure is seen to threaten the local environment.

If previous attempts at regeneration have failed or stalled, or if communities feel they have been over-consulted and their views not heard, there are likely to be high levels of mistrust towards the local authority and developers. This will create extra challenges for community engagement and in particular, for the frontline staff who are leading on engagement and consultation with local stakeholders.

Community responses to these issues can range from grumbling to passionate opposition. Staff who are leading on community engagement should be briefed, trained and supported to work in these difficult situations.

Good communication, honesty, acknowledging the mistakes of the past, and providing real opportunities for influence can help to rebuild local relationships, and in some cases, turn opposition into support as in the case of the [Quaggy River Action Group in South London](#) a resident led group that positively influenced plans in Lewisham that affected the River Quaggy. However, this takes time, skill and commitment.

The HCA has identified a [skills framework](#) for people working on community empowerment that may be useful for considering the softer skills staff will need for community engagement work.

Useful links:

[Welsh Assembly's guide to consulting homeless people](#)

[CLG's range of publications and advice on promoting community cohesion](#)

[CLG Guidance on Planning for Gypsy and Traveller Sites](#)

## Why does bad engagement matter?

When done badly and without a clear purpose, community engagement can be a waste of time for all the stakeholders involved – residents, communities and the organisations leading the engagement process.

This can have a negative effect on local people's appetite for participation and the reputation of the organisations that are involved. Activities carried out without a commitment to respond to the findings or those designed to support a preordained result are meaningless, and can have an equally negative outcome.

Sometimes this stems from the reality of community engagement being at odds with high-level strategy. This reflects the competing demands and resource pressures on local stakeholders. As well as poor quality engagement, without effective coordination and a shared commitment, there is a risk that different council departments and partners in one area will duplicate engagement activity.

There is such a thing as too much engagement activity. This can lead to 'consultation fatigue', with local people being asked to take part in a plethora of forums, meetings, and activities. Engagement can cease to be meaningful if it is undertaken purely for the sake of having to be seen to engage.

One way of avoiding this is for those involved to develop a shared understanding of community engagement and to take a consistent approach, sharing what is happening on the ground. Where there is already a comprehensive community engagement strategy in place, planned engagement may well fit in within existing structures and processes.

In practice, community engagement can highlight the tensions at a local level between participative and representative democracy; between those elected as politicians who might feel that they are the representatives of the local community, and members of the local community seeking opportunities to exercise more influence and power over their own affairs. Local politicians can be very influential in determining the success or failure of support for community engagement activities. You will need to be careful that engagement activity and its objectives does not become politicised, or used for party political purposes.