



Community engagement



Creating and managing places that can be used and enjoyed by people who live nearby helps to ensure that places are sustainable. Involving local people in development decisions helps to ensure that the eventual designs are appropriate, enjoyable, well used, and cared for by the community.

It is vital to involve local communities in the earliest planning stage of regenerating, developing or constructing public open space.

Community engagement is now an important part of many funding applications. However, engaging people in a project should be more than a 'tick box' activity to satisfy potential funders. Successful community engagement is

about developing productive relationships. Not only relationships between practitioners and local people, but between different community groups as well, that will continue beyond the life of the project.

For managers and staff, community consultation opens the door to people who have personal experience of the difficulties of using public spaces and to a wide variety of perspectives and ideas.

For any community, being involved in the planning and user-testing processes of a project is a chance to help create a local space that appeals to them, their families and friends. It is also a chance to gain an understanding of the constraints that site managers face.

The benefits of involving people

There are many benefits to involving a diverse range of people from the local community. The benefits easily outweigh the time and effort required.

More sustainable spaces that are appropriate to the needs of the community

It's sad but true that often no one finds out what the community needs until a place is built and folks begin to complain. If a project finds out what a community needs its public space to achieve *before* construction begins then there is much less likelihood of bills for "improvements" next year. And the year after that, and the year after that... Say goodbye to the White Elephant.

Better relationships with the local community

A better relationship makes life easier for everyone. A healthy relationship involves mutual understanding and respect; it means that issues are dealt with instead of being left to fester; that ideas are brought to the table; that there is cooperation. Create workgroups of community leaders/interested people for ongoing projects

Easy access to a reservoir of specialist knowledge

Many people experience the outdoor environment in many different ways. It's impossible to guess how changes to the environment may affect different people. The best people to advise on how changes may affect them are the people themselves. Think of your community contacts as valuable specialists and work with them when making decisions.

Reduced maintenance and vandalism costs

Once again, you can save money by involving people. When people feel they have a say in how their environment is designed and managed they feel a sense of ownership. A sense of ownership often leads to a sense of responsibility. You may find that the group you get together will go on to organise themselves into a "friends of" group or community representation group and take on some aspects of the care of the public space.

Planning, Preparation and Facilitation

Overview

The community engagement process breaks down into a number of different activities. Many of these activities can be undertaken from your desk and can fit around other work. The following is a rough guide of the stages of community consultation.

1. Find people – actively seek out disengaged people
2. Cultivate your connections
3. Prepare your activities
4. Prepare your venue
5. Run your events
6. Run supplementary information gathering
7. Assess the results and integrate these into your planning
8. Distribute the findings and plans to your partners
9. Maintain the partnerships

Finding people

The most important part of the planning process is to involve a wide section of the community in the consultation. Groups associated with the space such as "friends" groups, local walking groups, sports clubs

and so on, are normally easy to locate. People with less or no association with the space such as disabled people, young people, older people, children, people who are on low income or unemployed, single parents and black and ethnic minority groups can be more difficult to find.

Allow ample time in the early stages to locate these disengaged groups and begin forming the foundations for a working relationship; chatting about the project, the significance and level of their role in it and



Creative engagement techniques

the needs of the group to enable them to participate fully in the consultation. If your project is within your area then locating and contacting these groups may only take half a day; for projects in areas less known to you then this may take longer depending on your network of contacts. Some groups will require extra effort to reach and extra provision in order to have an equal say in any decisions. The effort you put in at this stage will reward you with a richer understanding of the issues and a greater chance of creating inclusive spaces that

everyone can use and enjoy.

Establishing mutual respect between yourself and the local groups involved in the community engagement sessions will help to diffuse potentially negative attitudes that may arise from past experiences. People involved or interested in a project need to feel that they will be listened to and that their ideas and comments will be respected. People should also feel that they will be given open, up-to-date and honest information about the project, including any constraints which may affect them.

Ensure that you have been provided with any relevant information from the site management or project manager, to be able to answer most questions at this stage, or that you can obtain the answers as quickly as possible. During the engagement session, it is often useful to have the site staff/manager present to be able to answer questions relating to site history, current maintenance plans or, commonly, hearsay about other developments in the area which may affect the project.

Local community groups may consist of:

- Volunteer groups
- Schools (both mainstream and those for learning disabilities)
- Businesses
- Disability groups
- Groups for older people
- Learning difficulties
- Day centres
- "Walking for Health" groups
- Ethnic minority groups
- Youth groups
- Pre-school and playgroups
- Sports clubs such as tennis clubs, bowling clubs, cyclists clubs and jogging clubs
- Hobby groups: bird watching, ramblers, historical societies, environmental/

conservation clubs, scouts/guides.

Where to search for local groups

- Local authority websites

These usually have a section on local volunteer and community groups, their main contact and a brief description of their activities. Some local authorities have a Community Liaison Officer who works with local groups in the area and can be an excellent resource for contacts.

- Local branches of national organisations (for example, Age Concern, Mind, Mencap, RNIB and RNID)

They may not be able to give out details of members, but are willing to send out information to their members.

- Your network of work-related contacts

These may be able to supply contact details for groups or organisations that they have been involved with.

- Advertising

Use your website, local radio or local newspapers, including any free publications, to advertise for local groups or individuals.

- Local Directories

Yellow Pages, Thomson's or any other local directory will hold contact details for local disability organisations, health centres, day/residential centres, sports groups (including those for disabled people) etc.

- Make contact with as many groups as you can.
- Make a reasonable effort to present the project as something they would enjoy being involved in.
- Arrange to visit those who seem interested. It is better to work with people who are enthusiastic about the project

Preparation

The whole experience of the engagement process should be as pleasant as possible for everyone involved. If you stress that it's about 'engaging' rather than 'consulting', this may help to clarify the nature of the session beforehand. Jargon words such as 'consultation' can be intimidating or off-putting for many people and can create negative feelings about the process that can hinder the session initially. Try to use plain language in all your communications. It helps to think of consultation planning as though you were planning a social event.

"We would like to involve your group in the consultancy process for the initial scoping stages of the project"

Becomes

- Decide how best to arrange the consultation groups: how many days, what activities will you offer, what groups would work well together and so on
- Make sure everyone has enough information about the project before they come
- Create information and activities that are accessible and will yield meaningful feedback
- Arrange catering and additional support such as BSL signers if required
- Send out schedules for the day in good time; particularly to people with learning disabilities or their representatives so they can prepare for the day and reduces anxieties about what the day will hold for them

“We would like to chat about how we might work together”

Develop a positive relationship with the group from the beginning and maintain contact through to the activity sessions by keeping people informed of developments. It is a good idea to form your relationship with one person in the group who can act as their main contact. This might be the club secretary, school head teacher or simply the group member most interested in the success of the project. Maintaining contact with the group in the period leading up to the session strengthens the foundation of the relationship. It also helps to shape how the activity session should be delivered, by working with your contacts to ensure that the activities you plan to use will get the most out of the groups and deliver the information required.

Use this time to work with your contacts to establish which activities or techniques will be most appropriate for their members. The best technique or activity will be one that the group understands how to use, feels comfortable with and that will allow them to freely express their concerns and ideas.

Different activities and techniques should be used depending on the group. For example, children and people with learning disabilities and learning difficulties can be involved using creative activities and by providing images or objects that stimulate them to respond (make sure that you don't influence their thinking by only using images that you think will be useful or that you prefer, use a wide range of images).

Facilitation

Set out the guidelines at the beginning of the activity session to help steer the group in a positive direction. Ensure that everyone understands and agrees that the process respects everyone's ideas and concerns and that everyone will be given the opportunity to contribute.

Schedules for groups, if required, should

Create an atmosphere

For many people this may be the first time they have been asked their opinion on anything. Even the experience of being in a room full of people can be intimidating for some so it is vital that the atmosphere feels welcoming. Food and drink is a good way to settle people in. Think of yourself not as a facilitator but as a host: it's your responsibility that everyone has a good time. Think of your group. What sort of situation might they be familiar with? For example, older people might feel more at ease if the atmosphere was like a coffee morning with tea and cakes. Children might prefer party food and games. People who are relaxed will more readily give their opinions.

go out to them before the day so that they are prepared before the session. Begin the day by going over the schedule, this is particularly helpful to people with learning difficulties as information provided before the event may not have been clear.

Create an atmosphere that allows people to feel able to comment without fear. Be careful not to allow personal or organisational goals to steer the process. You have a right to an opinion, but be aware that, as facilitator, your opinion will be seen as carrying more weight than those of others and that many people will be sensitive to hidden agendas. There should be a balance between allowing people to feel that they can voice their concerns and ideas without fear of retribution alongside

giving them clear information that not all ideas can be used within the improvements but that they need to work alongside current financial, environmental and management plans.



On-site sessions

Where possible, host the session within the public space itself. This is particularly valuable for people who have never visited the site before and helps to put everyone at ease more quickly than commencing the session indoors.

Older people, people with limited stamina and disabled people may require rest, a toilet break and refreshments before or while being taken around the site. Children and young people may want to walk around the site first, particularly if they have travelled some distance.

The weather can be influential on these sessions. Rain is an inevitable part of the British weather so don't be put off or feel you need to hold the sessions indoors. As long as it's not pouring or freezing, some inclement weather can help focus on ideas such as shelter and different activities. Make sure that everyone involved in the session knows to dress for the weather and carry on!

Off-site sessions

If carrying out part of the session indoors the chosen venue must be accessible to wheelchair users and within easy access to public transport, with appropriate lighting for people with a visual impairment and, if possible, a loop system for those with a hearing impairment.

Think about:

- Whether the lighting is sufficient for people to see each other clearly
- The clarity of any maps or reading material that you may use with the group: will it be accessible for all those involved?
- The use of whiteboard, flip chart or PowerPoint presentation: will everyone be able to receive and understand the information?

Additional Input

There are other methods that can be used to obtain information on concerns and ideas for improvement from the community in general. Additional information can support the results of the consultation sessions and can add weight to a funding application or management plan.

Additional/supporting information can be obtained using non-interactive methods:

- A section on the website that informs people about the project and provides a place for people to contribute their opinions and ideas.
- A leaflet drop in an area of the community you wish to focus feedback on. Provide various ways for people to feed back, tear-off section of the leaflet with postage paid, contact details and a website address.

This will provide you with information from across the community but may not always be accessible to those within the community from socially excluded groups such as older people, young people and children, disabled people and black and ethnic minority groups. These techniques

should be seen as additional to the interactive consultation sessions and not as an end in themselves.

Beyond the initial engagement

Continue the relationship after the engagement session has taken place, particularly with those community members who have expressed an interest in receiving further information or becoming more involved through voluntary work. It's important to carry through any promises of further contact. Resources should be allocated for this at the beginning of the project. Groups that you maintain contact with are a valuable resource who can test anything that has been designed as an outcome of the consultation, (leaflets, signage, information, interpretation and so on) or hard landscaping (paths, steps, handrails

and so on); they can assist throughout the development stage, ensuring that your design continues to be accessible and enhances the site as much as possible; they can also be contacted again for future projects and will be more than willing to be involved if you have developed a mutually rewarding relationship. Think of your community contacts as design partners.

Things to avoid

- Avoid jargon when consulting with community: inappropriate language can create a barrier between site managers and the general public and can reinforce any "them and us" feelings that there might be within the group.
- Avoid negative terms during feedback sessions, for example: "this route is inaccessible to wheelchairs" – it may not be to one determined wheelchair user!



The results of a place mapping engagement session



Sensory Trust

The Sensory Trust promotes and supports the creation and management of outdoor spaces that can be used and enjoyed by everyone, regardless of age or ability. We offer training and consultancy services to help you create and manage environments that are accessible and enjoyable for a diverse range of people.

- Site Reviews
- Inclusive Play
- Audience Development Plans
- Community Involvement
- Access Plans
- Visitor Experience Assessments
- Diversity Awareness Training
- Accessible Information

For more information on our services visit www.sensorytrust.org.uk/our_services/

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