

GUIDE TO GOOD COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: Q&A

This note provides a summary of questions and answers from the live webinar held on 19 August 2020. For more details please view the recording at townsfund.org.uk/events where a copy of the slide deck can also be downloaded.

Covid has pushed a lot of consultation online but this can exclude older, low income or vulnerable residents. How do we include these people?

You mention carrying out face-to-face engagement, but in light of Covid-19 restrictions how is this possible?

- Make use of Town Deal Boards and their networks. They will represent several different community groups and other civil society organisations – tap into their contact networks and channels (newsletters etc) and ‘consult on your consultation’. Use your Town Deal Board (or relevant sub-group) as a sounding board for your stakeholder engagement plan. They can advise on appropriate venues, channels and platforms for the community groups they represent and may identify (and help fill) gaps in your plan.
- Consider how you can use the public estate to provide outlets for information materials on the Town Investment Plan. One town even worked with colleagues managing local markets to make use of poster sites in high footfall area to promote their consultation. Another example is where a major infrastructure project set up stands at supermarkets and service stations to promote their scheme design and gather feedback from the local communities and those that travel through the area.
- There is no ‘one size fits all’. The best stakeholder engagement plans will incorporate a mix of face-to-face, digital, phone and postal engagement tactics to reach as wide an audience as possible. Newsletters, letters and traditional distribution methods can be highly effective in reaching people even during Covid-19.

Covid-19 has changed the way we live and communicate - with the various measures in place for safety, how would one tackle digital exclusion in regards to engagement?

- Some towns have used community groups to undertake telephone surveys of their members.
- Hyper-local media can provide a route to residents who may not engage online. While some hyper-local media is digital (including WhatsApp and Facebook groups), parish newsletters and residents’ associations provide potential routes to reach these audiences in the most relevant way.
- In a relatively cost-effective way targeted postal distribution of materials can effectively reach communities with a high proportion of residents who may not have internet access or who are less likely to engage online.

Do you recommend an online portal?

- A website page serves as a destination to which promotional materials can point the public and stakeholders. It can provide a single source of information on the Town Investment Plan, aiding clear understanding of the aims and objectives of the Towns Fund and your TIP.
- Platforms such as Citizen Space can be used to structure your consultation questions to ensure you get the data you need in a format which can be used to provide evidence for your TIP.
- Websites and consultation platforms should be accessible and use Plain English, providing a quick and easy user experience with dedicated sub-pages.

How do you engage with stakeholders that are outside of your place that don't usually access the place?

- Engage with local Destination Management Organisations (DMO), tourist board or tourist information centre. They may hold data on visitors and will regularly carry out surveys on the visitor experience which may provide useful evidence for your TIP. You could also consider running a survey of their database (subject to GDPR) to gather feedback from tourists.
- Work with transport operators to promote your plans to - and seek feedback from - commuters. Advertising at stations/transport interchanges, on buses and trains and in service stations will encourage this audience to engage and clearly get messages across to a wider audience
- Local and regional transport organisations and business partnership groups also have wide ranging networks and understand the context and benefits of place. Speaking with them may provide some insights, data or contacts that could be useful.
- Social media is also an effective channel to update people from further afield and provide information about what's going on in the local community that don't have access to traditional community methods of disseminating information, i.e. word-of-mouth.

Would it be inappropriate to offer an incentive to encourage engagement with consultation?

- There are examples of where incentives were offered to encourage engagement. However, what you choose to do will depend on your town-specific context, the audience that you would like to engage and the objectives of your consultation. What might be appropriate for one town or situation, might not be appropriate for another.
- One town ran a creative writing competition for young people with a small prize for the winner. This was a great way to engage with a younger audience and, over and above the prize, entrants were incentivized by the opportunity to see their ideas in the TIP and to take part in the further development of plans for their town.
- Another example which would be applicable when projects are being delivered saw children's drawings displayed on hoardings during construction.
- When incentives are directed in the right way (as in the in above examples) they can demonstrate a further commitment to community investment and strengthen relationship-building with stakeholders.

What good practice have you identified in using the MyTown website?

- While it can be difficult to identify strategic themes, with many comments focused more on day-to-day issues, MyTown provides a source for ideas, feedback and quotes which can add a local voice to TIPs which might otherwise be more technically focused and 'data heavy'. Taking local voices into account is essential to positively influencing the future direction of projects, and gives a chance to hear from a wider representation from across the community.
- Feedback on MyTown can also help to illustrate and reinforce the 'golden thread' which should run through your TIP, linking the challenges identified with your vision and objects and, ultimately, the projects you've identified.

Is there a risk of engagement overload? Local authorities tend to know what their residents want.

- There is always a potential for engagement overload. However, if your engagement is well thought out and planned, then the risk of overload can be minimised.
- Timing is important. Where you can, avoid clashing with other consultations in your area to prevent 'consultation fatigue'– or link up with them if the topics are related to ensure you receive the most constructive feedback.

- Also keep in mind that the Further Guidance suggests that towns can make use of past engagement and consultation which helps support the projects proposed in their TIP.
- However, we have experienced rapid change in the last few months so, if possible, a 'temperature check' to see if and how views have changed in the light of the impacts of Covid-19 would be worthwhile.

There is a real focus on face-to-face but in our town this is not possible because of Covid-19. How do we overcome this?

- We recognise that it is a sensitive time as we recover from Covid-19 and there are challenges to carrying out face-to-face engagement. Digital can go some way to filling the gap – but also work with your Town Deal Board and make the most of their networks to reach as many different community groups as you can.
- Digital engagement can bring in new audiences and can be more democratic – it is not always the loudest voices which get heard. Digital approaches can also generate more nuanced and thoughtful feedback as people can reflect on materials at their own pace.
- Virtual consultation rooms can be useful resources, setting out all the information you would expect to see at a public exhibition or drop-in event.
- More detail will be provided on digital engagement in the upcoming webinar on this subject (scheduled to take place on 26 August).

How do we conduct face-to-face while complying with social distancing rules?

- Arranging phone appointments for residents to discuss questions can provide an alternative where face-to-face is not possible.
- A mix of digital, phone and postal outreach can also help to fill the gap, utilising different channels to reach different types and tiers of stakeholders.

Timescales are really tight. How can we get all this done given all of the challenges?

- Make use of your networks, for example through the Town Deal Board.
- Working with civil society organisations and their resources to contact public members can be very helpful and also build relationships and trust with your community.
- Draw existing evidence from previous consultations and engagement activity where relevant.
- Provide information in places where the public are still congregating (e.g. at transport interchanges, supermarkets and shopping centres).