![Towns Fund - Delivery Partner logo]

ENGAGING WITH HARD TO REACH GROUPS

ENSURING THAT ALL COMMUNITIES HAVE A VOICE AND COUNTERING THE RISK OF DIGITAL EXCLUSION

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OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

HARD TO REACH?

Hard to reach or seldom heard groups are defined as people that are typically under-represented in the planning or development process, or in wider public life.

This could include ethnic or language minorities, people with disabilities, young people, the elderly, people with low literacy levels and people who simply do not think their participation will make a difference as their voice will not be heard. These groups may be difficult to engage with because they do not feel empowered to do so, or due to barriers which can be overcome.

DISMANTLING THE CONCEPT

Rather than viewing people you want to engage with as 'hard to reach', think of how you can make project communications and information more accessible.

It is important to remove any potential barriers to engagement and be clear about what we are asking from groups identified as hard to reach.

Projects should be designed with everyone across the community in mind.

Diverse views are needed to make a a project's design as responsive to these views as possible.

WHY REPRESENTATION IS IMPORTANT

Representation is essential for an inclusive society.

Consideration of diverse voices should be at the heart of your planning, as part of the process of creating positive change through projects, as outlined in our **Social Value guidance**.

Inclusive communications are key to making people feel like they are represented and important to both your Towns Fund projects and the future of your Town.

Over targeting or focusing on individuals or groups who regularly respond to consultation and engagement activities can lead to the views of harder to reach groups being overlooked.

IDENTIFYING HARD TO REACH GROUPS

Firstly, it is important to know and map who you need to reach. Be clear about who you want to talk to and get to know your different audiences.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR COMMUNITY INFLUENCERS

It will also be important to find community influencers and leaders who advocate for the different 'hard to reach groups' and build a relationship with them.

You will not always have the time available to form long lasting and meaningful relationships with all of the hard to reach groups in your area. As members of the community who are trusted and already have strong relationships with the groups you want to reach, they can pass on your messaging and information about your project. They can also help with your direct messaging, for example, youth leaders will have a better understanding of how to engage younger audiences.

The organisations below can help you identify hard to reach groups – you may also have existing databases from previous consultations that can be used as a starting point and added to.

- **Community groups (including community liaison officers)**

- **Places of worship and religious organisations**

- **Jobcentres and employment assistance programmes/coaches**

- **Housing groups and associations**

- **Registered charities**

- **Facebook groups and social media**

- **Social enterprises**

- **Food banks**

- **Youth groups**

HOW TO ENGAGE WITH HARD TO REACH GROUPS

MAKE IT PERSONAL

When planning the desired engagement methods and messaging for your project, there should be different strategies for engaging different target groups.

If possible, face-to-face engagement is the most effective. However if this is not possible due to social distancing, telephone engagement is a viable alternative that is still personal.

Mostly, stakeholders are interested in how a project will improve quality of life for them and those closest to them. In order to engage different groups, messaging needs to outline the benefits of your projects for local communities.

REMEMBER: Sometimes the messages you want to shout the loudest might not be the ones the target groups are most interested in.

Try to avoid just sending blanket emails. If there are specific 'hard to reach' groups you want to engage, address letters/emails personally to the person you want to reach. Using the targeted messaging for that stakeholder group, you can demonstrate the project's commitment to hearing their opinions and lay the foundations for strong future relationships.

REMEMBER: You get out what you put in – tailor and adapt your communications to connect with hard to reach groups.

Although blanket messaging might be the easiest, it is not the most effective.

TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS: REACHING OUT

Do not be afraid to pick up the phone. Sometimes an email is not always the most effective form of communication. There are some groups who won't be easily contactable by just one email address or phone number, but by phoning those who do have an available number you can:

- Make sure you have the correct person's contact details to continue future engagement activities

- Promote your project and the targeted messaging for that group

- Add personality to your projects, which is easier to portray on the phone

- Build a more personable relationship to demonstrate your commitment to engaging the individual or group

- Discover any barriers to engagement early on in the process.

HOW TO ENGAGE WITH HARD TO REACH GROUPS

BE PROACTIVE

After completing an audit of the groups you would like to engage (as outlined in our **Guide to Good Community Engagement**), ask them how they would best like to be consulted/engaged.

You may not be able to deliver on every request, but even if they cannot say exactly how they would like to be engaged with, they will likely have an idea of how they would not like to be engaged with.

HOW TO ENGAGE WITH HARD TO REACH GROUPS

STAY CONSISTENT

Start building relationships as early as possible. Get to know the hard to reach groups you are targeting and involve them in the planning of upcoming engagement.

You should consider two components for engaging 'hard to reach' groups, **time and trust**. Should your target groups be short on time, for example parents of young children, then consider early engagement with community influencers. If trust is a barrier, consider dedicating your time to build that trust before you need input from them on your project.

Maintain engagement and relationships with **regular, meaningful updates** on the status of your projects. These do not have to be every week. Any updates should highlight community benefits of projects as a key focus and they don't need to be too detailed.

Continue a dialogue with your hard to reach groups for a short period after a period of more focused engagement and then let them know when they won't hear from you for a while. Leave the door open for them to get in touch should they need anything else and ensure the relationship stays strong to pave the way for further engagement in future.

REACHING YOUNGER AUDIENCES

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Young people may feel excluded from plans for your Town, due to their age group and the labour market, where their ideas, opinions and skillset may not always be taken into account at a local level. To combat this, positive engagement with young people should be encouraged throughout project lifecycles.

Young people like going to events and it is important to listen to what they have to say.

Holding focus groups, open days, free activity pop-ups and/or fair days at universities or youth groups will create engagement and advocacy. Here, a close link can be formed to better understand young people's needs - this will allow development of specific key messaging and themes that are best suited to engaging young people such as focusing on access to social spaces, education, employment and sustainability.

REACHING YOUNGER AUDIENCES

Young people are often keen to get involved and gain 'real world' experience. By holding events and activities that include them from the start, it will allow them to use their expertise, enthusiasm and energy to create advocacy for our activities and messaging further but also help involve other young people and build that encouragement amongst their peers.

Utilising social media such as accounts/adverts on Instagram, Twitter, YouTube or TikTok will produce content that is more relevant and engaging for a younger demographic as they are likely to use through these social media channels. This is where algorithm-based data can be used to figure out what time and day of the week younger people are online more so that engagement is most efficient.

For more information on engaging with young people and more specific tips, you can consult our **'Engaging Younger Audiences' Guide**.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

ENGAGING WITH DIVERSE COMMUNITIES AND GROUPS

It is important to take into account protected characteristics when you engage with hard to reach groups, including people from diverse backgrounds.

Minority ethnic groups make up about 13% of the population of the United Kingdom (ONS 2011). It is not just important but essential to ensure diverse participation in engagement activities you are carrying out for your projects. As you know the demographics within your Town and community best, consider how you can best reflect and respond to the needs of people from different cultural and minority ethnic backgrounds intersectionally in your area through your projects.

Of all the places that you may consider when planning a strategy of reaching out to diverse ethnic and migrant groups, schools are the most accessible places where you will find a number of migrants and members of ethnic minorities from diverse communities.

ENGAGEMENT THAT INCLUDES PEOPLE FOR WHOM ENGLISH IS NOT A FIRST LANGUAGE

Other places which are worth considering when planning to engage diverse groups are:

- Community centres

- Supplementary language schools (like Polish Saturday schools, of which over 500 exists across Europe)

- Centres where adult migrants or ethnic minority members learn the language of the host country (i.e English)

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility must be a core requirement of every piece of communications content relating to your projects.

According to the World Health Organization, over a billion people (one in eight of the world's population) have some form of disability.

Hard to reach groups can include people with permanent disabilities and also those with temporary impairments and situational requirements.

Generating content that is inclusive will ensure the greatest degree of accessibility.

To improve accessibility, you can use tools including:

• Online best-practice guides like the **IBM Equal Access toolkit**

• Accessibility tools your organization may already use to ensure information communicated is clear and can be understood by everyone

• Plain English - ask someone who does not know about your projects to read the information and see if they understand it and know what is being asked of them

• Alternative Formats - meanwhile, an average of one in four younger people (25% aged 16-34) labelled having information available in alternative formats, such as in easy read, braille or different languages was very important, compared to just 12% of older people (aged 45+), suggesting accessible content is key to ensure your activity and content can reach wider audiences.

Provide some examples of alternative formats - the list doesn't have to be exhaustive but could help prompt any stakeholders. You can also provide any attachments in a Word document, some groups may be able to adapt the format to best suit their group members' needs, e.g. language/font/font size/colour.

REMEMBER: consult members of your target community and audience before investing in translations and alternative formats, to ensure you are communicating with them via the most relevant method.

ACCESSIBILITY

To ensure your communications are as accessible as possible, try and avoid:

- Methods that rely on IT or print that may cause issues for people with visual impairments. These methods are useful but are seldom sufficient on their own and will require companion materials to ensure accessibility.

- An online-only approach (see more in our section on Digital Exclusion on p15). All planned engagement activities should incorporate face-to-face or other personal engagement methods (such as a telephone conversation) if face-to-face engagement is not possible.

- Inappropriate language, technical descriptions and jargon.

- Treating self–appointed spokespersons as a substitute for their community. Do consider them seriously but make sure to seek to engage as many people within a specific hard to reach group as possible.

For more detailed information on the types of accessible communications you can use to facilitate engagement with hard to reach groups, including visual content, using alternative text to accompany images and making your social media content accessible to all, you can consult the **PRCA Accessible Communications guide**.
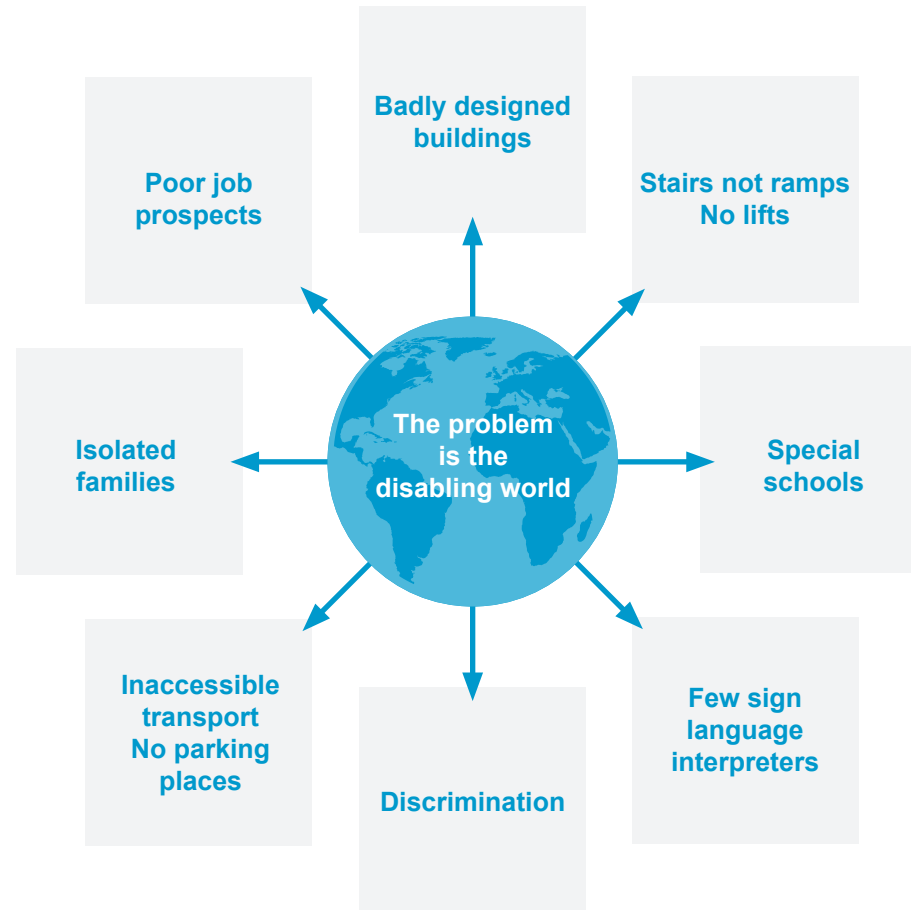
ACCESSIBILITY

SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

The social model of disability considers that it is the responsibility of all individuals and organisations to make the environment, systems and activities inclusive and accessible for everyone.

It is not the responsibility of individuals to 'fit in' to a system or environment that excludes them and not their fault if they cannot participate because an event, information, building or environment is not accessible

The social model is a good basis to use for improving engagement with people with disabilities and others who may face barriers to participation.

Poor job prospects

Badly designed buildings

Stairs not ramps No lifts

Isolated families

The problem is the disabling world

Special schools

Inaccessible transport No parking places

Discrimination

Few sign language interpreters

DIGITAL EXCLUSION

Last year an ONS report found that 7.5 per cent of UK adults had never used the internet, with the number rising for older age groups and amongst the disabled. The internet is being used increasingly across all areas of life.

Digital technology offers a number of benefits which those who are digitally excluded are missing out on. COVID-19 has brought this digital divide into even sharper focus, with vital services such as education and healthcare being delivered digitally during lockdown.
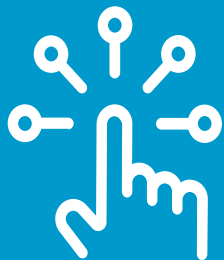
To prevent the risk of digital exclusion, it's important to:

- **Complement online materials with a print newsletter or posters in public places such as libraries and GP surgeries**

- **Use local newspapers as a platform to communicate project milestones to the residents of your Town**

- **Distributing materials by post can be costly on a large scale, but mapping software from the Royal Mail and other providers enables precise targeting of areas where engagement may be lower than average**

- **Set up a Freepost address and create easy to complete feedback forms. This will also help to increase your response rates**

- **Use contactable telephone numbers for projects and provide access points in your Town with information to ensure hard to reach groups have the access to get involved in your Town's future and can make their voices heard.**

Find out more in our blog on **'Bridging the Digital Divide'**.

QUESTIONS

It is important to ask yourselves if your existing modes of engagement are landing with hard to reach groups and what more you can do to improve representation and accessibility.

- Do you have diverse representation?

- Are your communications materials accessible and inclusive for everyone in your community?

- Do you have alternative methods to ensure people aren't digitally excluded from your projects?

- Are you providing people with opportunity to provide feedback via a range of channels (social media, newsletters, stalls, telephone etc)?

- Which audiences are you not getting through to at the moment and how can you encourage them to participate in future?

TOP TIPS

To help answer the questions on the previous slide and inform future engagement, bear in mind the following top tips for engaging with hard to reach groups:

BE CLEAR, ENGAGING AND ACCESSIBLE
Avoid over-simplification as this has the tendency to seem patronizing

BUILD ON WHAT YOU'VE ALREADY GOT
Use existing relationships within your community to involve them with your projects and as a route into other groups

TAKE YOUR TIME AND DO YOUR RESEARCH
Give hard to reach groups the support they need and the space to engage with projects in the ways that work best for them

BE FLEXIBLE
Remember any engagement cannot be 'one size fits all' and adapt your approach to suit the needs of the specific hard to reach group you're targeting

BE PERSONAL
Meet face-to-face and engage directly where possible

STAY IN TOUCH
Provide regular updates and keep the conversation open

BE PRACTICAL
Think about potential logistical barriers to participation like timing, format of meeting, transport links and facilities

BE OPEN
Show hard to reach groups that their feedback is being taken into account and how your dialogue with them is making a difference to the future of your Town (via reports or a summary of engagement).

RESOURCES

IBM accessibility

PRCA Accessible Communications Guidance

Communications Access UK training and accreditation

Worcestershire Council's SCULPT

GCS Accessibility Campaign website

LGA's Guide to engagement

A Cll's workbook on neighbourhood and community engagement

RESURCES

RESOURCES

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Visit the Towns Fund **website** for more stakeholder engagement resources.

This guide is available in alternative formats and languages upon request.

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